



G R A C E

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

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MARKS OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH SERIES

Sermon Notes

Resolving Conflict in the Local Church

Matthew 18:15-20

January 6, 2007

- I. **Go in Private**
- II. **Take Witnesses**
- III. **Take it to the Church**

- Each Sunday, throughout this country, millions of Americans wake up and “go to church.” Yet, rarely is the question asked, “What constitutes a church?” Or, more appropriately, “What are the biblical qualifications of a New Testament Church?”
- The Reformers of the 16th Century were consumed with this question. In light of the corruption they observed, not only morally, but in the perversion of the gospel message, they sought to “**Re – form**” the Church, beginning with the local body, to its New Testament standards.
- Thus, after careful study of the Scriptures, the Reformers declared that a New Testament Church [the *visible* church as they would have said] is a gathered body of believers where:
 - The Word is rightly preached;
 - The Sacraments [Ordinances] are rightly administered;
 - Discipline is rightly upheld.
- Thus, according to the Reformers [and Scripture!], if an organization does not commit to these three functions, it may be a well-organized group of people, but it is not a New Testament Church!

- ❑ Most churches, it seems, would strongly assert that they engage in the first two of the functions mentioned above. However, very few take seriously the commands of Scripture concerning church discipline found in Matthew 18:15-20.
- ❑ This is where the proverbial “rubber meets the road.” This is where the words of Scripture meet the practicality of daily life.

“Divorcing biblical teaching from daily living is compromise of the worst sort. It corrupts the church, grieves the Lord, and dishonors His Word and His name.” John MacArthur

- ❑ We may say that we as a church believe that the Bible is the Word of God. We may stand on its inerrancy. **However, if we do not have a mechanism and a sense of intentionality within the church whereby Matthew 18 can be fulfilled, then we certainly cannot claim that the Scriptures are truly sufficient in our local body.**

If a church, for any reason, cannot follow Matthew 18 – whether it be because of its size [it is too large], its leadership structure [it is too hierarchical], or whatever may be the reason – then it cannot properly call itself a New Testament church. The church, like the individual, must conform itself to the standards of the Scriptures. It does not have the liberty to “pick-and-choose” what parts of Scripture it would like to follow, and what parts are unnecessary in its particular situation or circumstance.

- ❑ When seeking to understand the ultimate purpose of Matthew 18:15-20, one must, as with all things, view it **in light of God’s glory**.
 - The Church ultimately exists for God’s glory. Christ died for the Church and the Church stands as the holy community in the midst of the world.
 - It is a direct parallel to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament.
 - In the Old Testament, in his dedication of the Temple, Solomon prayed:

“O LORD, the God of Israel, there is no God like You in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing lovingkindness to Your servants who walk before You with all their heart, who have kept with Your servant, my father David, that which You have promised him; indeed, You have spoken with Your mouth and have fulfilled it with Your hand as it is this day...But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built! Also concerning the foreigner who is not of Your people Israel, when he comes from a far country **for Your name’s sake** (for they will hear of Your great name and Your mighty hand, and of Your outstretched arm); when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to You, **in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name**, to fear You, **as do Your people Israel**, and that **they may know that this house which I have built is called by Your name.**”

1 Kings 8:23-24, 27, 41-43

- In other words, the people of God, who bear the name of the LORD, are, in all that they do and say, to reflect the His holiness and glory.
- Church discipline purifies the church. It ensures that the Body of Christ is pure and holy and reflects God’s character. Without it, the church is no different than any other “Christian organization” and ultimately no different than any human organization, Christian or otherwise. Without the practice of church discipline, in accordance with Matthew 18, the world simply looks upon the church and sees itself. A Church where sin is not acknowledge, in accordance with Matthew 18, will tarnish the name of Jesus Christ – the very name that it bears.
- Yet, when biblical church discipline is practiced, the world sees a group of people that love and care for one another and ultimately hold one another accountable to the common standard they all claim to strive for. In short, **the world sees a biblical church as something fundamentally different than any other organization; indeed, a holy entity.**

I. Go in Private

- This section begins, in **Verse 15**, by the Lord Jesus Christ saying, “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.”
- From this Verse, several truths are revealed:
- The first point that this passage brings out is the reality that **there will be conflict** in the church. After all, the church is simply a local gathering of fallen people, albeit Christians. As a result of their fallen human nature, even Christians sin – often against one another.
 - Yet, the presence of conflict in a local church does not necessarily threaten the health of that respective body. This is true in any relationship, such as a marriage. However, when the conflict is not resolved in a biblical manner, the overall health of the body is put in great danger.
- Secondly, this verse stands in direct contrast to the prevailing sentiment of our day with respect to sin. **Every sin, regardless of how private it may be, damages the health of the overall body of Christ.** In fact, if the church is functioning in a biblical manner, even the private sins of its members will affect the health of the church in a noticeable manner – whether it be through gossip, slander, or even through introduction of liberal theology and doctrine.
 - However, in our 21st Century American culture, we seek to live lives of isolation from others. We are, indeed, a culture of extreme individualism. We do not want people “prying into our business.” We like to live our “church lives” on Sunday, and the rest of week be left alone.

- Therefore, it seems that the predominant feeling in our Christian subculture in this country is that “my sins are my business” and others should “mind their own business” rather than confronting me of my sin [regardless of the nature of the sin].
- Yet, this perspective, regardless of how common it may be, is contrary to the Word of God. **Biblically, all sin is to be confronted, either through confession [to the LORD and/or a Christian brother or sister] or rebuke by a brother or sister.**
- **Even the most private of sins will manifest itself in the life of the individual somehow.** The reason for this is that sin is like a cancer. Left alone, it will quietly spread until the whole body is “infected.”
- From a biblical perspective, sin is like yeast – a little spreads throughout the entire lump of dough.

Galatians 5:9

“A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough.”

1 Corinthians 5:6b-7a

“...Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened...”

Ephesians 2:19-22

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.”

Ephesians 4:11-13

“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.”

- Thirdly, many Christians believe that to confront a brother of his/or her sin constitutes “judging” him, and is therefore a violation of Matthew 7:1: “Do not judge so that you will not be judged.”

- Yet, the words of John Calvin are quite helpful here:

“*Judge not* These words of Christ do not contain an absolute prohibition *from judging*, but are intended to cure a disease, which appears to be natural to us all. We see how all flatter themselves, and every man passes a severe censure on others. This vice is attended by some strange enjoyment: for there is hardly any person who is not tickled with the desire of inquiring into other people's faults. All acknowledge, indeed, that it is an intolerable evil, that those who

overlook their own vices are so inveterate against their brethren. The Heathens, too, in ancient times, condemned it in many proverbs. Yet it has existed in all ages, and exists, too, in the present day. Nay, it is accompanied by another and a worse plague: for the greater part of men think that when they condemn others, they acquire a greater liberty of sinning. This depraved eagerness for biting, censuring, and slandering, is restrained by Christ, when he says, *Judge not*. It is not necessary that believers should become blind, and perceive nothing, but only that they should refrain from an undue eagerness to *judge*: for otherwise the proper bounds of rigor will be exceeded by every man who desires to pass sentence on his brethren.”

- Fourthly, verse 15 states “...**go**...”
 - The one offended is called to take the proactive step in addressing the individual who offended him or her.
 - One of the reasons for this is that **often we unintentionally offend others, yet, we never know that we have.**
 - Furthermore, often times when someone is offended, he or she does not go to the one who offended him or her, and then begins to build up resentment and bitterness toward that person [who may not even realize what he or she has done wrong].
 - Along these lines, as well, it will give the offender “insight” into the one who has been offended [i.e., the offender will know what areas to be sensitive about in the future with respect to the offended].
 - All this being said, it is a sin against the offender when we do not go to him and let him know that he has offended us. This is often difficult for many who are not “confrontational”; yet, this, like so many other commands in Scripture, is not always easy to do, but God will provide the strength to obey His Word.
- Fifthly, in this context, we should go to the offender **immediately** or at least in a very timely manner.
 - When we wait to confront sin, the sin often takes root and begins to corrupt the individual, producing bitterness, resentment, cynicism, and even hatred.
- Next, we are to “go and **show him his fault**...”
 - The root word here for “show him his fault” is the Greek *elencho*, “reprove.”
 - It means “by conviction to bring to the light, to expose.”
 - This is the same root word used in 2 Timothy 4:2: “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.”

- Once again, this brings up the issue of Scriptural sufficiency. When we “show someone his fault” we should do so on the basis of Scripture. Scripture should be the standard by which we determine what sin is; and it must be the basis by which we rebuke sin.
- However, often times, we, in our self-centered, sinful natures, are easily offended by something that may not even be a sin. In other words, before we go to a brother, we need to prayerfully consult the Scriptures to ensure that what our brother has done is, indeed, sin. Otherwise, the problem may rest with us, not them.
- Those of us who are easily offended, may be so because of sin in our own lives.
- Seventh, we are to “go and show him his fault **in private.**”
 - This is one of the most difficult aspects of Matthew 18 for most of us.
 - It is often the case that when a brother sins against us, we feel that we are at liberty to tell as many people who are willing to listen about the offense. However, biblically this is a sin – we call it gossip.
 - Few things will destroy a church like gossip and slander.
 - We, as fallen creatures, are experts in masking the sins of gossip and slander.
 - After feeling that we were offended, we go to others, saying things like, “**I am seeking counsel concerning an issue with so and so...**”
 - Or, “**Please pray for me and so and so...**”
 - God knows our hearts, and where as others may not pick up on the sinful, self-righteous nature of these comments, God knows our motives.
 - So often, when we share the offenses of others to those uninvolved with the situation, we do so with a motive of wanting to feel as though we are right – or at least gain the perception from others that we are right. There is a strange sense of justification that comes by being affirmed by others, even in our own sin of sharing information that is not ours to share.
 - This brings up another point that is significant: **We should never provide a forum in which a brother feels free to speak of another’s offense, prior to obeying Matthew 18. It is our Christian duty to say, “Have you spoken to the one who has offended you?” If the answer is “No”, then we should not let the person speak to us.**
 - Although this may be difficult and uncomfortable for us to do, we do so in obedience to God’s Word – for His glory.

- Furthermore, this is one of the most powerful practical steps that a church can take in eliminating the devastating effects of gossip and slander in the local church.
- It is also a step that serves to rebuke **and correct** those who may struggle with gossip themselves. For, if someone does not have a forum in which to speak, and are lovingly confronted as well, they, too, may be restored.
- Yet, none of the “tactics” mentioned above are biblical; we must **first go to our brother in private**.
- One of the practical reasons for this is that when we are restored with our brother, if we have shared the offense with others, those that we spoke to may still hold the offense against our brother.
- Also, going to our brother first **in private** forces us to exam our own motives.

- The purpose of Matthew 18:15-20 is not to punish, but to awaken and **restore**. [1 Corinthians 5:9-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:15; 2 Corinthians 2:5-8] If our motive for confronting a brother is not loving restoration, then we, ourselves, are in sin.

- Our purpose must never be to rebuke in order to retaliate or show any sort of righteous superiority.
 - We must continually examine our own motives before confronting a brother. We must guard ourselves against exposing someone’s sin in order to make ourselves feel in some way better than him.
 - In fact, **the truth is that in the course of our Christian lives, we will often sin against others, thus warranting correction ourselves**. Such a truth should always keep us humble.
 - Therefore, when we are confronted by a brother for sinning against him, rather than becoming defensive [as is the normal reaction for all of us], and questioning his motives for confronting us – we must humbly ask ourselves, “Is what he is saying – is the “charge” – true?” If it is, we must humbly repent, in order to restore the relationship.
- Finally, “...if he listens to you, you have won your brother.”
- The idea here is that you have gone to your brother **in private**, he listened to what you had to say, and you have restored the relationship [“won your brother”].
 - One of the most common results of following Matthew 18 is that the one who was “offended” by a brother may discover that the “offense” was truly not a sin. The “offense” may have simply been a result of a miscommunication. Yet, this

discovery would never have occurred had the one “offended” not approached the “offending” brother.

- This may involve mutual repentance, but the beauty is that the relationship is restored.
- Once again, if you have said anything negative about your brother [i.e., gossip] to anyone else prior to this private meeting, the issue is not truly settled – for others now have a negative view of the brother – even after your relationship with him has been restored. Yet, if you have immediately gone to your brother and “won him over”, the issue is resolved.
- **There are certainly few things sweeter than restored fellowship that has been won through this process. Understanding is gained, and often the relationship is better because of this process.**

- Furthermore, the fact that “you have won your brother” indicates that **the issue is over. It is never to be brought up again. It is not to be used as fodder in a future argument. Rather, as God extends forgiveness to us, we are to, by God’s grace, seek to move on from the offense in a spirit of complete forgiveness. As best we can, we are to act as though the offense never happened [although certain consequences of the offense may be lasting].**

II. Take Witnesses

- It is certainly possible, however, that after approaching a brother in private, and confronting him of his sin, he will not listen to you.
- In the event that he does not listen, **Verse 16** states, “...take one or two more with you, so that **BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED.**”
 - In this context, the witnesses are not necessarily witnesses of the offense itself. They may only be able to testify that: (a.) **the offense is, indeed, a sin from a biblical perspective;** and (b.) **they have tried to help the offender recognize the sin and repent of it.**
 - Also, by approaching the offender with one or two witness, this keeps those aware of the offense still at a small number.
 - Further here, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 19:15 concerning the necessity of witnesses in confirming the truthfulness of one’s testimony. The standard of the Jewish court was based upon this passage.
 - Therefore, one of the main points here is that the standard of the church should never be less than the standard of the courts.

- This is basis for Paul’s caution against believers taking brothers and sisters to court [1 Corinthians 6:1-11]. The reason for this is because a healthy church should resolve conflicts among believers without resorting to the courts, where those judging Christians might do so apart from Scriptural standards.
- Yet, there is still a possibility that the individual does not repent. If this occurs, then the offended is to take the final step in Matthew 18: tell it to the Church.

III. Take it to the Church

- **Verse 17** states, “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”
 - Ultimately, the sin which was initially rebuked in private now becomes public.
 - NOTE: The usage of the term “church” here, *ekklesia*, is a reference to the local body of believers; the assembly or congregation.
 - Even here, though, the church must hold out, initially, that the individual will repent.
 - Again, the purpose of making the sin public is not to humiliate or shame the offender; rather, it is to restore.
 - However, even then, after telling the offense to the entire church, the offender may not listen.
 - If the offender does not listen to the church, then, Scripture states that the church should “let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”
 - The term Gentile, to the Jewish hearer, would have meant a non-Jew who was a pagan.
 - The term “tax-collector” often referred to a Jew who was a traitor; one who was “an outcast...by choice.”
 - The removal of the unrepentant sinner from the congregation is the final step in the church discipline process.
 - In simple terms, to treat an unrepentant sinner as a Gentile or tax collector is to **treat him as an unbeliever**.
 - It does not mean that you go out of your way to criticize or shame the individual.

- It means, in practical terms, that **you are to evangelize the individual, for the assumption becomes that since the individual rejected all biblical appeals to repent, that he is not a true believer.**
 - Another practical effect is that the individual is not to participate in communion, for the Lord's Supper table is for believers.
- Then, in **Verse 18**, the Lord says, "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."
 - This Verse has often been misinterpreted and misapplied. Yet, in this context it is not that difficult.
 - Leon Morris wrote, "...the probability is that we should understand the 'binding' and 'loosing' as declaring forbidden or permitted. That would certainly fit this context, where the church in the last resort has to say whether what the offender has done is forbidden to the Christian or whether it is permitted...This was very necessary in a situation where the Jewish Scriptures were accepted as the Scriptures of the believers, but where the Jewish interpretation was rejected, as were many Jewish practices that those who performed them alleged were based on Scripture."
 - It is crucial to see that the verbs translated "shall have been bound" and "shall have been loosed" are in what is known as the future perfect.
 - Morris continues: "Jesus is not giving the church the right to make decisions that will then become binding on God. Such a thought is alien from anything he is teaching. He is saying that as the church is responsive to the guidance of God it will come to the **decisions that have already been made in heaven.**"
 - In short, the idea here is that the church will gather collectively, examine the offense of the offender, then examine the Scriptures to determine whether or not God has declared such offense as a sin. **If the church collectively determines, through careful examination of the Scriptures, that the offense is, indeed, a sin, then it will "bind" the sin [forbid it]; otherwise, it will "loose" it [permit it].**
- Finally, Jesus concludes this section in **Verses 19-20**: "Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst."
 - The idea, here, in this context, is that when the church collectively agrees, on the basis of Scripture, that one's offense is sin, then the Father and the Son are in agreement with the Church.

- John MacArthur explains, “When the church acts in God’s behalf and in accordance with His Word in matters dealing with sin, He acts in their behalf by confirming and empowering their faithful decisions and actions.”
- Not only this; however, but “...where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.”
 - In other words, the Son also stands with the church [along with the Father] in its declaration of sin and commitment to the purity of the Church; for ultimately, this commitment to purity is done so to the glory of God and the sake of His name.

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❖ From this passage, several truths, which are often neglected, emerge:

1. Unity of the Body of Christ is very important to God.

- Unity in the Body of Christ models the eternal unity of the Godhead [Father, Son, and Holy Spirit].
- Disunity or strife ultimately tarnishes the Name of Christ as it stands in direct contrast to the eternal nature of God Himself.

2. Local Church membership is very important

- Biblically, accountability always occurs within the context of the local church.
- If a professing Christian is not a member of a local church, then he has placed himself outside of the biblical context of accountability.
- Furthermore, if a church neglects this necessary function, then it does a monumental disservice to its members by not calling them to pursue lives committed to the Scriptures.
- It also reflects the view of Scripture that a local church actually holds to when it neglects such a straightforward teaching.

3. The Nature of Church Membership is not what many of us are used to.

- To join a New Testament church that is committed to the Scriptures requires a degree of commitment and submission that few of us are used to [or even comfortable with].
- Many, if not most, of us join a Church because it is a great place to fellowship and meet people. Furthermore, it is a “good” thing to do

because in a church people talk about God and the Bible, etc. Also, many young families come to the conclusion that a church is a good place to join because they have young children, and those children can learn about God in Sunday School.

- Yet, biblically, we should join a church because first and foremost the local church is committed to the faithful proclamation of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ through the exposition of the Scriptures.
- Such a commitment will necessarily lead to a mutual desire among its members to hold one another accountable to the standard of God's Word.
- Thus, if someone is looking to join a "social club" or a place where he can "fit in without being noticed," a committed New Testament Church will probably not be the place for him. [Of course, this in no way implies that he would not be welcomed; it simply means that membership in a New Testament church requires a degree of commitment that many professing Christians are simply uncomfortable with.]
- When someone joins a New Testament church, he submits himself to the authority of not only the church as a whole, as well as its leadership, but to the individual members themselves.
 - In other words, when one joins GRBC, he is submitting himself to being held accountable to Scriptures by other members. This is NOT legalism; rather, it is loving, biblical accountability. Furthermore, it is one of the greatest blessings of being a part of a local church.
 - It is also noteworthy that even the elders are not exempt from such accountability [1 Timothy 5:19-20].
- Also, this level of commitment among members of a local church spurs each individual on to a deeper, more biblical, understanding of the Christian life. No longer is the believer satisfied with living a life of spiritual superficiality.

In his *Treatise on Religious Affections*, Jonathan Edwards wrote:

Fallen human nature is fertile ground for a fleshly religiosity which is impiously 'spiritual' but ultimately rooted in self-love. High emotional experiences, effusive religious talk, and even praising God and experiencing love for God and man can be self-centered and self-motivated. In contrast to this, experiences of renewal which are genuinely from the Holy Spirit are God-centered in character and based on worship, an appreciation of God's worth and grandeur divorced from self-interest. Such genuine experiences create humility in the convert rather than pride, and issue in a new creation and a new spirit of meekness, gentleness, forgiveness, and mercy. They leave the believer hungering and thirsting for righteousness instead of satiated with self-congratulation.

4. A Regenerate Church membership is essential.

- One of the primary tenets of historical Baptists is the call for a regenerate church membership.
- One of the main reasons for this is Matthew 18.
- The reason for this is clear: How can a body of professing believers “bind” or “loose” anything, in accordance with the Word of God, if a majority, or even a large portion of it, is not even saved?

5. Matthew 18 reveals the true nature and danger of sin in the life of a believer.

- Once again, sin is to be confronted and dealt with if a believer is to live a life committed to the glory of God in all things.
- In Matthew 18 provides the antidote for dealing with the devastating power of sin in the life of a believer: exposure.

The [liberal] German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his work *Life Together* wrote:

“Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person. This can happen even in the midst of a pious community. In confessing, the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. The sin must be brought into the light. The unexpressed must be openly spoken and acknowledged. All that is secret and hidden is made manifest. It is a hard struggle until the sin is openly admitted, but God breaks the gates of brass and bars of iron (Psalm 107:16).

Since the confession of sin is made in the presence of a Christian brother, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders; he gives up all his evil. He gives his heart to God, and he finds the forgiveness of all his sin in the fellowship of Jesus Christ and his brother. The expressed, acknowledged sin has lost all its power. It has been revealed and judged as sin. It can no longer tear the fellowship asunder. Now the fellowship bears the sin of the brother. He is no longer alone with his evil for he has cast off his sin from him. Now he stands in the fellowship of sinners who live by the grace of God and the cross of Jesus Christ...The sin concealed separated him from the fellowship, made all his apparent fellowship a sham; the sin confessed has helped him define true fellowship with the brethren.”

6. Finally, Loving restoration, to the glory of God, is ALWAYS to be the motive for confronting a brother.

Galatians 6:1-2: “Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourselves, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.”