

How to handle sin in the church: reflections on Matthew 18:15-20

an ebook by Jon Swanson

These reflections started as posts at 300wordsaday.com.

helping each other grow.

Your brother Dave is a good guy. He really is. So when you see him look twice at the waitress at lunch, you don't think much about it. Your sister Helen is a wonderful cook. So when she stands in the kitchen after dinner talking about the neighbor's peculiar habits, you don't think much about it. Old uncle Ed has been part of family events since, well since before you were born. When he starts telling his jokes about *those* people, you all squirm, but that's just uncle Ed.

We all know Dave and Helen and Ed. We often *are* Dave and Helen and Ed. We care about them deeply. We want them to be wonderful growing people. We don't want to do anything to hurt them.

So we harm them.

All the time.

Every time we let Dave think that admiring that waitress is acceptable, we are harming him. Every time we let Helen rip apart the neighbors, we are harming her. Every time we let uncle Ed slander a race or a nationality or a culture, we are harming him.

How?

Because we are telling each of them that Jesus doesn't really matter.

Jesus spoke specifically about lust and gossip and hate. And he spoke very specifically about talking to family members about those things. Not to everyone, mind you, but to family members. People in the family of God.

Let's look at what Jesus says in Matthew 18:15-20 about sin and relationship and conversation and restoration. It's a hard topic. It hurts to talk to other people about sin, theirs and ours.

However, our calling as followers is to follow better, closer, more completely, more freely. Helping each other in this calling is pretty important. It's worth thinking through.

Beginning a community of trust

“If your brother sins, tell him.”

(Some of the Greek manuscripts, the early copies of the Bible say, “sins against you.” Most do not. As a result, some of our English translations say “against you,” some do not. In a sense, it doesn't matter. Any sin that disrupts your life, disrupts mine. The closer the community, the greater the disruption.)

That sounds so judgmental. That sounds so critical. That sounds so invasive. After all, we say, who am I to tell anyone that they have messed up? My own life is so far from perfect.

Exactly.

Who better to sit down, quietly, away from everyone else, and say, "Here's what I noticed. Here's what it looks like. Here's why I'm the last one to point fingers. But we're doing what Jesus said to do."

This is a quiet conversation, a humble conversation, a Jesus-righteous rather than self-righteous conversation. This is a conversation between two people. This is a conversation rooted in family relationship--not (necessarily) biological family, but the family which grows with God as the Dad. This is an invitation to a community of helping each other see what we can't see ourselves and being grateful that others will do the same for us. The point is to be clean, not critical.

This probably doesn't mean going to six people and saying, "I have to talk to brother Dave about that horrible problem of his. Please pray that he will listen."

That approach often, though not always, is a blend of seeking information, gossiping, and avoidance. Instead, this a serious but informal interaction happening on a regular basis between people who care deeply about each other, expecting and encouraging the best from each other.

But, did Jesus?

As I thought about this process Jesus is starting to describe, I thought, "But, did Jesus do this?"

The question comes because it is hard to help other people consider sin. The question comes because Jesus often says something and then lives it. The question comes because if we are learning from Jesus how to follow him, it would be interesting to see if/how he lived what he taught.

So did Jesus ever look at someone who sinned and address them individually? You mean like he did with Martha who was rushing around ignoring him? He spoke to and said, "listen to me." (John 10:39)

You mean like he did with a woman whose relationships were, as Facebook says, "complicated?" He spoke to her and said, "I'd like to help you fill the hole in your heart." (John 4:7-42)

You mean like he did with Peter who had abandoned Jesus and then denied ever knowing Him? Jesus spoke to him and said, three times, "Do you love me? Feed my sheep." (John 21:15-19)

You mean like person after person who came for healing and he told, "your sins are forgiven."

Jesus consistently put himself in the presence of people who had sinned and gently but specifically pointed out the problem, offered forgiveness, and continued to have a relationship with them. There is a serious informality, a warmth. Sometimes we see a response. Sometimes we don't. Likely, there are many such conversations we don't see.

When Jesus says, "If your brother sins, tell him," Jesus was merely saying, "Here's the restoration principle you have been watching me live."

"If he listens to you."

Jesus is talking about how to talk to someone about sin, someone in your spiritual family, someone who already has agreed to the house rules and is now bending or breaking them. As we have seen, Jesus says to talk to them. And then he talks about next steps: "If he listens to you."

We *assume* that people don't like to be corrected. We *assume* that that, whatever the sin is, whatever the offense, the person meant what they did and want to persist in their behavior. We assume it because, well, because, um, we assume it because we look in the mirror and know that we don't like to be corrected.

But for many of us, most of the time, we are not planning to willfully pursue a flagrant disregard of God's directions. In fact, for many of us, most of the time, a close friend, a spouse, a sibling, a child approaching us and saying that it looks like we have sinned and that they are concerned for us will cause us to stop.

We see the love. We understand what it took for this person to raise the issue. We know from the Holy Spirit gently poking at us that we are out of line, out of alignment with God's desire.

"If he listens to you."

Of course, it is possible in the conversation that we will discover that *we* have misread the situation, that we have misjudged the person. That happens, too, and we must be willing to listen.

What is most likely, however, after building a community of trust, that we will have seen rightly, that they will listen to us, and that their behavior will change. "If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."

If not, there is a next step.

Witnesses.

to the next level

It looks like Jesus is calling for reinforcements.

Not for himself. For you.

He is talking about what to do when you see someone sinning, someone doing something that God has indicated not to do (a reminder that I don't get to decide what counts as a sin). After talking with a person one-on-one, Jesus says, "if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'"

What it feels like is ganging up. But think about how the previous conversation would sound.

You go to your friend. You say, "that looks like something you shouldn't be doing. Am I misunderstanding or are you actually choosing to do something God asked us not to do?"

Your friend says, "Nope, you've got it right. I've thought about it and I think that in this situation, what God said doesn't apply to me."

You say, "But don't you see what that means? Are you sure?"

Your friend says, "yep. I'm sure."

You *could* do nothing. Or you could tell everyone what your friend is doing. Both of those have problems. The former lets your friend keep doing what will hurt. The latter is gossip. So Jesus says, "Make sure." Ask your friend if you can come back with a couple other people. The other people can listen so you and your friend have someone who can say, "No one's making this up." They can help both sides know whether someone is misunderstanding the other. They can represent maturity (which is in the Deuteronomy text Jesus quotes). They lend a seriousness to the conversation. This isn't about ganging up. It's about slowing down, listening to be

sure of what each is saying.

It's an *unrush* to judgment.

Most church services that people attended over the weekend did not include a public rebuke.

I'm sure there were many private rebukes, in which one person accused another (not in the conversation) of dressing inappropriately, of taking the wrong seat in the sanctuary, of not watching children while they ran on the platform after the service, of spending too much or too little on a car or vacation or refrigerator or cell phone. These conversations, in which we confess the "sins" of others, happen every Sunday in every church I know of. And those conversations are wrong, coming as they do under the heading of gossip or critical spirit or not forgiving.

No, I'm talking about the kind of public rebuke that Jesus has been describing in Matthew 18. A person is approached in a serious, but informal way, by a person that loves them and truly has their best interest at heart, They don't see anything wrong with what they are doing, or don't see any need to stop.

After a private conversation, two or three other people are invited along.

And now, Jesus says, if the person doesn't pay attention, we are to tell it to the church. Publicly. We shy away from this. But we do it all the time. We just tell the church about the misbehavior of people in whispers and emails. "Did you hear about?" "Can you believe that?"

Jesus is saying, "don't smear their reputation, like you often do. Don't shut them out. Don't leave them dangling. Instead, ask the person to come to a meeting of the church and let's let everyone hear at the same time."

Jesus wasn't creating a forum to crucify people. That was being covered elsewhere. He was forcing conversation into the open, with a clear process, and a desire for reconciliation.

telling it to the church

If you get miffed at your church today, there is another one down the street you can visit tomorrow. You don't even have to go down the street. You can turn to your computer and participate in a church online.

I am not against options. I have myself moved from one church to another more than once, though after careful reflection and prayer and just before problems erupted. I know enough about people, however, that this many choices makes "tell it to the church" a challenging command.

Jesus is talking about what to do when someone does what he (Jesus) said not to do (Matthew 18:15-20). He says that after talking with the person individually and then with a couple other people, quietly, caringly, restoratively, if the person is, in fact, intentionally continuing their behavior, you are to tell it to the church.

Here's the obedience challenge.

Did Jesus mean a small house church, where doing what he says means sitting on the deck with 20 people that you know well, that you have shared life with, that you have seen struggle, too? Did he mean a country church of 70, where everyone is related? Did he mean a group of 10,000 that gathers in 5 venues and 10 time slots every weekend? Did he mean a group of 100,000?

When Jesus said these words, there was no church, not the way we think of church, with buildings and structures. There were just the ones gathered around Jesus, the ones who had decided to follow him, to listen to what he said and do it the best they could. They didn't have options, they couldn't go down the street to another denomination because there was one Body.

Of course Jesus knew about all the variations that would follow. He gave the directions anyway. They must still apply somehow. And we need to thoughtfully, prayerfully, take that next step.

The reason that outside isn't so bad is that inside isn't so good.

When Jesus said that people who didn't respond to three distinct, thoughtful, caring challenges to their behavior needed to leave the church, He was intending that the threat of having to leave the warmth of community in the church would be a deterrent that would make people rethink having to leave it.

The fact that the punishment was to treat the sinner as a pagan or a tax collector merely illustrates what Jesus wanted from the church. Jesus loved tax collectors. He sought them out. Matthew himself was a tax collector, or had been. Matthew may have smiled as he wrote these words, remembering the party that he threw for Jesus when he first starting following. (Look at Matthew 9 for more on this story.)

He had his friends over to meet Jesus. The Pharisees stood outside, questioning how Jesus could be spending time in such company. Jesus said that he had come for people who needed him. So the tax collectors were the heroes, the ones who wanted to be with Jesus. And now, in Matthew 18, Jesus says that when people don't repent, they are to be treated like tax collectors. But Jesus isn't assuming that the church will be like the Pharisees, capable only (as least for Matthew) of scolding. Just the opposite.

The church is to be tax collectors transformed, pharisees reborn, prostitutes renewed. It is a collection of misfit toys so in love with God and each other that to have to go outside is punishment, even if there is love. Jesus wasn't setting up a system of shunning. There was not to be silence. There was respect and compassion and an openness for the one being walked to the door to return when repentant. Just the way Matthew had started.

Serious business, relationship is.

After laying out the process of caring for people who have not done what he says, Jesus gives the implication: "Whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven." There is a connection between here and there, between what we say and what God does. If we say, "you aren't living right," God says, "you aren't living right." How can that be? Because when we get together, in twos and threes and more, and we ask God to guide us, he will. The judgment we arrive at, through reflection and conversation and examination, has to be viewed as coming from God.

I know. That's a terrifying idea. Very many people have very many stories of misguided people doing dumb, bad, and horrific things in God's name.

But, and I say this cautiously, what people have done wrong with what Jesus said doesn't mean that He was wrong to say it. And what people have done wrong with what Jesus said doesn't exempt us from obeying Him. That's why, when I look at someone's behavior, thinking "that's killing you," I feel sad. And when I say something, one on one, I am aware that I am involved in holy work, on God's agenda. If I find myself too happy about the process, handling it too lightly, then I have to back off and examine why, exactly, I thought that God was prompting the conversation.

That's why, when I'm part of two or three talking with someone, I'm incredibly sensitive to any feeling of "ganging up" on someone. That's why, when something has to move to the level of talking with a larger group about the ongoing offence, I am achy and deliberate.

But that's why, when I watch what happens when we don't follow through, I weep at the waste.