

Resolving Problems Between Brethren

In Matthew, Jesus gives step-by-step instructions on how to resolve problems between brethren. Matthew 18:15-17 says, *"And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And 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-gatherer."* In Matthew 5:23-24, the direction is reversed, and you are commanded to resolve the problem. The passage says, *"Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."*

Going to the person who has sinned against you will probably not be pleasant. He may refuse to talk about it. He may react badly to what you say. He may get angry or defensive. But that is no excuse for not approaching him at all. There is just too much at stake. We should be willing to risk a little discomfort if it may mean regaining a lost soul (James 5:20). When you go to someone who you have sinned against, try your very best to work out your problems and restore peace.

When a brother sins (especially against us personally), our first inclination is usually to broadcast it. We call Sister Blabbermouth on the phone and tell her all the details. We complain about it at our weekly lunch with brother Gossip. It never occurs to us to go directly to the source first. But that is precisely what Jesus tells us to do. And the reasons should be obvious. Your brother may be unaware of what he has done. He may be in desperate need of some instruction and encouragement. Or perhaps the whole problem is just a misunderstanding. The only way to know is to talk to him.

You never ambush your brother or sister in the foyer of the meeting house, where countless others may hear. You do not publicly embarrass him with insinuations or accusations. Humiliating him in front of others will do nothing to regain him. Instead, you and your brother sit down face-to-face, one-to-one, and discuss the situation. Our efforts to restore one caught in a trespass are to be *"in a spirit of gentleness"* (Galatians 6:1). Remember that your purpose is not to punish or seek revenge. The singular motive is concern for his soul. This is not to say that your approach should be timid or uncertain, but we can be firm without being unkind.

No doubt many an explosive situation could have been defused (and many a wandering soul restored) if one person had simply had enough courage and concern to say, "We need to talk." True, it will not always achieve the desired affect. Further action, including withdrawal from the one who refuses to be reconciled, may be necessary. But, if we will do what the Master said, we may be quite pleased at the results. Finally, remember Colossians 3:13: *"Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye."*

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