

# Resolving Problems Between Brethren

**Introduction.** Perhaps the most famous sibling rivalry occurred between Cain and Abel. Abel offered a proper sacrifice by faith (Genesis 4:3-5; Hebrews 11:4), and Cain wickedly killed him (1 John 3:12). The apostle John used this occasion to teach that a hate-filled spirit toward another is the same as murder (1 John 3:15).

In my 25 years of preaching the one problem I've found that is pretty consistent in all churches regardless of size, culture, or local customs is the challenge of maintaining good relationships. Specifically, how do you deal with a personal offense from a brother or sister in Christ?

Psalms 133:1 says, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" As you might imagine, the opposite of this verse would be terrible. One of the worst problems a congregation can have is brethren who cannot talk to each other because of unresolved conflicts, or who allow sin to continue because they fear confrontation. Yet help is not far away. Jesus addresses the needs of brethren who are having difficulty resolving their differences.

## ***I. The Process Of Obedience***

A. When you are at fault (Matthew 5:23-24).

1. Go to that person and settle the difference immediately. Do not wait until the offended person comes to you.
2. Reconciliation takes precedence over all other duties, even of offerings made to God.
  - a) The Pharisees believed that if a man conformed to the external rites of religion, however much envy, malice, and secret hatred he might have, he was doing well.
  - b) However, the breach between man and God could not be healed until the breach between man and man was healed (cp. Matthew 6:14-15).
  - c) Please note that the Lord says nothing as to whether their reasons are sufficient or insufficient, just or unjust.
3. Problems that are allowed to fester will only get worse as resentment grows over the months or years (Ephesians 4:26-27).

B. When the other person is at fault (Matthew 18:15-17).

1. "Go and tell him his fault."
  - a) It is amazing how often this command is ignored.
    - (1) Do not wait, but be sure your attitude is right. Be humble, gentle, and kind. Speak slowly and softly (Proverbs 15:1; Galatians 6:1).
    - (2) In most cases when you have been offended, a friendly conversation will set the matter right and prevent difficulty. A quiet resolution between the two parties is by far the best way to resolve differences.
    - (3) Likewise, most people would gladly welcome the opportunity to correct a matter, and it is our duty to furnish it by going to them.
    - (4) George Herbert said, "He who cannot forgive others burns the bridge over which he must pass himself." If the person who offends asks for forgiveness, forgive them (Luke 17:3-4).

- b) The fault is pointed out to the offender for the purpose of gaining him — not from a desire to humiliate him.
- 2. “Take with thee one or two more.”
  - a) If the person does not listen, you must go to them with others.
    - (1) You do not go and talk to other people about them, nor do you drag the preacher into it by asking to preach a sermon to the person.
    - (2) Wisdom would dictate that the ones who go with you should be church members of influence or authority, their personal friends, or those in whom the offender would put confidence.
  - b) Notice that the principle is based in the Old Testament (Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; John 8:17; Hebrews 10:28).
    - (1) Although we are no longer under it, it still contains wisdom which God used in the New Testament (2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19).
    - (2) The purpose of the witnesses is twofold:
      - (a) It brings the brothers together again, by listening objectively, thoughtfully, and emphatically.
      - (b) The witnesses can also attest to your desire to work out the problem and of the improper conduct of the other party before the church. This is preparatory to the next step.
- 3. “Tell it unto the church.”
  - a) The matter is so grave that it must involve other brethren and even the entire congregation if the other person does not repent.
    - (1) Assuming the church has elders that are overseeing, they should take the lead in this matter, as they “watch for souls” (Hebrews 13:17).
    - (2) Their job is to keep the church pure and not allow sin to fester within the congregation (Acts 20:28-32).
  - b) The Jews gave the name “heathen” or “Gentile” to other nations. They had no religious fellowship with them.
    - (1) This unrepentant brother in Christ has forfeited his special relationship with the church. He now is to be considered as a pagan unbeliever outside our fellowship until he acknowledges his fault (cp. Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5:3-5; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14).
    - (2) This should not be done until all the steps are taken. This is the only way to preserve peace and purity in the church.
    - (3) Some say, it will not work, but in the case of the Corinthians the immoral man who was disciplined for his sin repented, returned, and was restored (2 Corinthians 2:1-11).
  - c) Some claim that this does not give a congregation the right to withdraw fellowship because they claim that the synagogue is under consideration.
    - (1) However, the church here is in prospect, as seen by the implied absence of Jesus in v. 20.
    - (2) Because the Lord was giving preparatory instruction, He was compelled to speak of the church before it actually existed.

## ***II. The Dangers Of Disobedience***

### **A. Ungodly attitudes.**

1. Anger is seen in the case of Cain (Genesis 4:5-8), Saul (1 Samuel 20:30-33), and Moses (Numbers 20:7-12).
2. Bitterness will most likely exist in the individual who cannot resolve conflict. David and Michal are unfortunate examples (2 Samuel 6:16-23).

### **B. The damaging impact on others.**

1. Bitterness can defile the one in whom it resides (Hebrews 12:14-15). Do you really think a bitter person will be peaceable in a congregation? What damage, then, could they do in a local church (1 Corinthians 5:6)?
2. Conflict in a congregation produces an uneasy tension which can produce even more conflicts. Visitors can sense tension and conflict, and they will go where brethren can maturely handle differences.

**Conclusion.** Matthew 18:18-20 assures Christians that the decision of the congregation in these matters, reached through a careful consideration of the word and prayer, will be ratified in heaven. God's plan fails, not because He lacks wisdom (Psalm 147:5), but because men are stubborn and rebellious in implementing it (Proverbs 17:11). Conflict can bring disaster for churches and eternal condemnation for those who refuse to settle their differences. We have to be patient and forbearing with one another (Ephesians 4:31-32). According to the passages in Matthew, neither party is to wait for the other. Seek out and correct your problems with others.