

Loving Confrontation

Part 1

Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus' prescription for addressing sin is the key to purity and unity in His church.

LTS: Luke 17:1-10

Once again come to God's word this morning to learn some things God wants us to know about his church. Last week we talked about the need for hospitality in the church. That, of course, is a happy topic. We like talking about meeting for joyful fellowship. But there is another kind of meeting together as brothers and sisters in Christ that none of us enjoy

Let's be honest right up front and confess together that no one likes discipline. Those on the receiving end of discipline don't enjoy it, and those who are on the delivery end of discipline don't enjoy it either. Nobody likes discipline. It's hard! Its uncomfortable! It feels unloving. Nevertheless, administering discipline is essential.

Show me an undisciplined child and I will show you an unhappy, rebellious child. Visit a home where there are several children who are undisciplined, or disciplined recklessly, and I will show you a home where anarchy reigns Nobody likes discipline, but the irony is that it's only through true, biblical discipline that purity and unity (not to mention love, joy peace and the other fruits of the Spirit) can flourish in the church.

Consider this. Every human institution (whether it be the government, the church, the home or the workplace) has problems. That's because every person in those institutions is a sinner. In fact, if you ever find a perfect institution, don't join it. You'll only mess it up! (Of course, I'm NOT speaking of you. I'm speaking of the person next to you). We are all hard-wired toward selfishness and pride rather than humility and love, so we sin against one another. Left unaddressed however, even small sins can do serious harm.

As Dr. Wayne Mack deftly comments, "the idea that 'Time heals all wounds' is one of the most insane statement ever made."¹ Time doesn't do anything but provide a fertile environment for problems to grow, warp, and fester until a small problems morphs into a kind of monster that ravages the church. That's the bad news.

¹ Wayne Mack, *Life in the Father's House*, (Phillipsburg, P&R, 1996), 133

Wouldn't it be great if there were a cure for such problems in the church and home! Well, I am delighted to stand before you today to announce the good news that God has provided just such a cure. It is usually referred to as "discipline" but it might be more helpful this morning to refer to it as "Loving Confrontation." God— as a gift of divine mercy and love for his church – has given us a means for addressing sin in a way that strengthens unity, deepens love and restores joy.

The gospels offer two occasions when Jesus verbalizes this comprehensive strategy for dealing with sin. Traditionally, it has been called Church Discipline. Keith has already read for us the Luke 17 version of Jesus' teaching on the subject but this morning I want us to focus on Jesus' words in Matt. 18.

Read Matt. 18:15-20

Behold God's solution for sin and conflict in the body of Christ! Behold the remedy for tension, anger and despair in the Christian home! Once again, God's sufficient word offers us the only timeless remedy to a fundamental human problem. For this we will praise His name forever!

Now I understand that most of us shudder at the thought of having to confront someone about their sin, let alone make a public spectacle of it. It feels at first like a terribly unloving thing to do, but when it's done according to the instructions Jesus offers, loving confrontation can be one of the fullest, most profound expressions of love anyone can show toward another person.

On the other hand, taking the "easy" road of ignoring sin is the equivalent of selfish hatred toward others because it leaves them to the destructive consequences of their sin.

There is a lot to be said about this text and it's going to take two weeks to say it. So, let's dive in.

There are four steps in Jesus fullest teaching on loving confrontation. Thankfully, step one is often sufficient in itself to bring about the desired remedy for sin. So, let's begin there with the first and most important step of Loving Confrontation. When a brother or sister in Christ sins, Jesus teaches us to

I. Step #1: Speak to your brother privately.

1. The first thing to notice here is that Jesus tells us who to confront. Notice he says (v. 15) "If your brother sins..." That is, the person you should confront is your

“brother.” He is a person who professes to be a Christian. He is someone who identifies with the local church.

- A. The word for “brother” is a family term that clearly refers to one who is part of the spiritual household of God.
- B. Once again, we see that the N.T. refers to the church as the “household” or family of God (1 Tim. 3:15). This speaks of the special relationship God has with his people.

2. The first thing we learn here is that Jesus’ teaching exclusively concerns the church. He’s NOT speaking about confronting outsiders and unbelievers (though there is a place for that). The focus, rather, is on confronting those who claim to be Christians and share fellowship with others in the body of Christ. If they make no claim of belonging to Christ, we don’t discipline; we evangelize!

3. This answer the question, “Who should receive discipline?” But there is second question; Namely, “What sins must we confront?” Jesus says that we should confront known sin, but he doesn’t give us a list to go by or offer any specific qualifications. Should we confront fellow believers on every single sin they ever commit, or just the big ones?

4. Through the centuries various Christian groups have gone to extremes on this question. It’s helpful to remember, however, that the word of God itself offers us several lists of the kinds of sins that God desires to protect his church from (e.g. 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19 Maybe read these?). One list stands out in my thinking because it names a number of sins that we don’t think of as all that sinful. (2 Tim. 3:1-5), Paul writes,

But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, etc... And Paul concludes this list by saying, “Avoid such men as these.”

5. Suffice it to say that we should confront a brother/sister in Christ when he commits any action that is forbidden in Scripture.² A helpful rule of thumb to keep in mind might be this. In light of the second step of church discipline (i.e. taking two witnesses with you to confront the brother) ask yourself “Would one or two more people of sound judgment consider this issue significant enough to go along with me?” If so, then it probably needs to be confronted.

² Wayne Mack, *Life in the Father’s House*, (Phillipsburg, P&R, 1996), 137

6. Friends, it may be helpful here to remind ourselves that God hates sin! Sin is what ruined God's perfect creation. Sin is the cause of man's condemnation. And the only way to redeem it (and us) was for His own precious Son to die a violent, bloody death in our place. Too many of us have a "Oops" view of sin. The Lord Jesus desires a pure and holy bride. But since His bride is made entirely of sinful people, Loving Confrontation is necessary when-ever sin becomes known. So, any action forbidden in Scripture should be addressed.

7. But notice that I said we should confront any action. That is, we need to limit loving confrontation to issues of observable action and/or words. Judging one another's motives is out of bounds. No one can truly know what is going on in another person's heart unless they intentionally reveal it. Nor do we get to confront one another on issues of preference, no matter how strongly you feel about it.

- A. Perhaps you enjoy one kind of music and someone else likes another.
- B. You might prefer certain kinds of food or drink the other person prefers something else.
- C. Be careful that your judgment of another person's actions is a truly biblical judgment and not just a violation of your personal sensibilities that are informed from something other than Scripture.
- D. Paul says "each person is to be fully convinced in his own mind" that what he is doing pleases the Lord. And if you are unsure whether or not you should do one thing or another, ask yourself "Will this be pleasing to the Lord?" After all, as Paul said, "We make it our ambition whether at home or absent to be pleasing to [the Lord]."

8. Another important question we should ask is, how should we confront a brother or sister who has sinned. I want to take a few minutes to counsel you on this matter. Let me offer you Six ways to approach a sinning brother.

#1. Personally: There is just something about going to meet the person face to face, eyeball to eyeball. It's not the same when you try to do this by phone or email or letter.

Let me tell you, I've done it all of those ways and they just don't have the kind of impact that a face-to-face conversation does. If you're not speaking face to face, there is no body language or, what we call "Halo Data." The person needs to see you face, your anguish, your tears. She needs to hear your

tone, sense your love, feel your touch (when appropriate). You just can't do any of that if you're not fact to face. So confront personally.

#2. Circumspectly: In other words, approach a person about sin only after examining your own heart to see if you have sinned as well.

In Matt. 7:1-5. Jesus commands that we take the "log" out of our own eye before trying to remove a "speck" in your brother's eye. He is commanding us NOT to address another person's sin if we have NOT first engaged in self-examination relative to our own sin – especially if you were part of the problem

#3. Privately: Notice (18:15) Jesus says, "Show him his fault in private." In other words, we must engage in biblical confidentiality." Remember, the only people who need to know about the sin are those who are either part of the problem or part of the solution. To do otherwise is to gossip and perhaps even slander. So, approach Loving Confrontation Privately.

#4. Tentatively: Remember the caution of Prov. 18. Verse 13 says, "He who answers before he has heard, it is his follow and shame." Likewise, verse 17 says, "The first one to plead his case seems right until another comes and examines him." The caution here is that many times things are not as they first appear. Humility and wisdom demand that you approach the matter tentatively.

Here is a helpful axiom to key in mind: "Questions convict the conscience but accusations harden the heart." There have been times when I have approached people on what I thought was sin only to discover that I didn't have all the facts. I was so glad that I approached them with questions rather than accusations!

So, we need to confront people Personally, Circumspectly, Privately, Tentatively...

#5. Gently: Gal. 6:1 is our guide here. "Brothers, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness..." There is no room for spiritual pride or superiority when confronting a fellow believer about their sin. When I need to be confronted, I want it to be by someone who realizes they are just as much in need of the Cross as I am. I don't want some self-righteous, holier-than-thou Bible thumper to come and cut me off at the knees. I want someone who will look me in the eye and say what needs to be said in a way that demonstrates their love for Christ and their love for me.

Paul told the Corinthians(2 Cor. 2:4) “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you.” Beloved, from time to time we may need to confront sin, but we need to do it gently and carefully in order to bring about repentance and complete restoration.

#6. Prayerfully: As with everything we do as believers, loving confrontation needs to be bathed in prayer. We need to go into that meeting knowing that the most important person there is not me and its not the person I’m confronting. Rather, it’s the Holy Spirit. Only He can bring about true repentance. Only He has the power to change a man’s heart. We need to plead with Him to come and do what only He can do in the soul of the person that we are called to confront.

We should pray too that he would use this circumstance to change our own lives and make us more sensitive to our own sin and give us a greater passion for purity and holiness. 1 John 5:14 “This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.” So approach the brother prayerfully.

9. So there we have it. All of us are called to confront sin among our brothers and sisters in Christ, but we need to be careful to confront them in a biblical manner; in a way that is pleasing to the Lord. That means we do it Personally, Circumspectly, Privately, Tentatively, Gently, and Prayerfully.

Illustration:

10. After a conversation with a church member a while back one of my staff came and asked, “Pastor, do you think you were as gracious as you could have been when you were speaking to that person?” I got the hint. The reality was that I had been impatient, haughty, and dismissive. But the Scriptures clearly teach that I should be “slow to anger,” and “patient with everyone.” I needed to ask her forgiveness, and when I did it made our relationship BETTER than it was before. This is step One of Loving Confrontation.

11. On another occasion, I came home from the office tired, hungry, and generally impatient with the family. At the dinner table the kids were being especially energetic and loud and I responded by giving them a verbal tongue-lashing (which, by the way, is nowhere prescribed in Scripture -. I checked the concordance). My wife (who was sitting at the other end of the table) responded simply by giving me a knowing look. She could have lashed out in defense of the children, but instead she responded in a

manner that was respectfully discrete and transparently clear. It helped me realize that I had verbally sinned against the whole family. It took a few minutes to humble my proud heart and gather my anxious thoughts, but within a few minutes I was able to confess my sin and ask their forgiveness. Once again, this is step One of Loving Confrontation.

12. Confrontation of sin is a necessary act of love between Christians . And, when offered in love and responded to with humility, it's a game-changer for the household of Kirk AND the household of God.

13. So the first step of loving confrontation is Speak to your brother privately.

Now, as we prepare to worship at the Lord's table this morning, I wonder how this teaching of Jesus is affecting your heart.

- Perhaps you realize that you have sinned against someone. They have offered some iteration of Loving Confrontation, but you responded badly. Is the Spirit of God urging you to make that right?
- On the other hand, maybe after hearing the teaching of Jesus on the subject you realize that you have such a deep fear of man that you never confront anyone on their sin. If that is your normal response, can I suggest to you that this too is sinful? Why? Because Jesus commands us to do it. It brings Him glory and preserves the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It is disobedience to the Lord NOT to confront sin that should be confronted. Is the Holy Spirit leaning on your heart this morning, urging you to repent of your loveless fear of man? Let me encourage you with a proverb that may encourage your heart. Prov. 28:23 says, "He who rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with the tongue."

14. You may think: Well, if we all do this won't we create a legalistic, loveless church? Well, doing it wrongly will harm the church. Using it as a license to express your own self-righteousness will certainly harm the church. But when we do it Personally, Circumspectly, Privately, Tentatively, Gently, and Prayerfully with a desire to truly restore the sinner and please the Lord, the outcome can only be a more loving, more mature, and more Christ-exalting church than we have ever had before.

15. Calvary Bible Church, we need to hear this message. Those of you who hope to join Christ Fellowship Bible Church, you need to hear this message. These are essential instructions for a healthy church, and we would do well to heed them. Jesus' prescription for addressing sin is the key to purity and unity in His church.