

What to Do *After* a Rebuke

Matthew 18:15-35

Halifax: 30 April 2017

Introduction:

Last week, I preached to you from Leviticus 19:17 where it says, “You shall surely rebuke your neighbour.”

- I explained to you how important it is for us to keep watch over one another’s souls.
- The people who know you best and love you the most ought to be first to come to you when you have sinned against God—
 - not to condemn you, but to earnestly try to win you back to the Lord.
- It is not that we should be criticising each other over every little thing that displeases us—not that at all...
 - But when there is sin in the sense of rebellion—departing from the Lord—in the life of our brother, we should care enough to go to him...
 - we should care enough about our brother and about the church and about our own walk with Christ, and most of all about the honour of Christ Himself.
- It is a hard thing to go to rebuke your neighbour, and we are all negligent in doing it, but Lord willing, we have all seen the importance of it and will, by God’s grace, engage more faithfully in this duty.

But when we do start to rebuke one other, there are problems that often arise.

- This is probably one of the reasons that we shy away from this duty—we are smart enough (in our worldly wisdom) to see that life will be simpler if we don’t bother.
 - But of course avoiding our duty is not the way to go.
- And besides, our Lord Jesus knows about the problems that arise, and in Matthew 18 He deals directly with two of them, and indirectly with a third.
 - So let’s consider what He says to us so that we will be ready to deal with problems that we may encounter when we are faithful about rebuking each other.

Please listen as I read this passage to you now—beginning at Matthew 18:15.

Matthew 18:15-35: “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ ¹⁷ And if he refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you that if two

of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” ²¹ Then Peter came to Him and said, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. ²³ Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵

But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. ²⁶ The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ ²⁷ Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took *him* by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’ ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ ³⁰ And he would

not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. ³¹ So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. ³² Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. ³³ Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?’ ³⁴ And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. ³⁵ So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.”

May the Lord bless to us the reading of His holy Word.

You can see that in verses 15-20, Jesus tells you what to do when you go to your brother and rebuke him, and he does not repent.

And then in verses 21-35, He tells you what to do when you your brother *does* repent but you find it hard to forgive him.

- We will look at these in order.

I. First of all, what should you do when you go to your brother and he refuses to repent?

A. Perhaps he says,

- “I know I broke into your home and robbed you, but I had good reason for doing it. You have more money than you know what to do with, and I hardly have a cent; and you, as my Christian brother, have been unwilling to share.”

1. One of the hardest things for a sinner to do is to admit that he has sinned.

- There is no end to what sinners will do to justify themselves rather than admit that they have sinned.
- You know how hard it is for you to admit that you have sinned.
 - So don’t be surprised if you meet with this kind of resistance when you go.

• And let me digress right here and say to all of you:

- Don’t you ever be the one who resists rebukes!
 - You should be so glad when your brothers and sisters care enough about you to say something to you!
 - Let your friends know that you want them to come to you—you don’t want to go on like a fool to ruin, do you?
 - Children, let your parents know that you want their correction.
 - Even if you fight them at first, thank them when you come to your senses.

- If you are headed down the road and the bridge is out, wouldn't you want someone to tell you?
 - Sin can deceive us—it can get a grip on us—and we need each other!
- Put away your pride.
 - As a pastor, there are people that I am hesitant to even admonish because I know that they won't receive it well...
 - but there are others that I am drawn to because they are eager to hear and will appreciate it.
- But now, back to what Jesus is talking about—when you are the one who is doing the rebuking and your brother does not hear...
 - We have seen that one way of his not hearing is that he refuses to admit that he has done wrong...
- 2. There are other times when you go to a brother and he admits that what he has done is wrong, but tells you that he does not wish to repent.
 - In the first situation, you find the brother in a state of denial,
 - In the second situation, you find him in a state of rebellion.

TRANS> Obviously, in either case, it makes it impossible for you to restore him.

- So what are you to do when this happens?—when he refuses to hear in either of these ways?

B. Jesus tells us in Matthew 18:16

- **Mat. 18:16: But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.'**
- 1. You are to get one or two people to go with you to investigate the matter.
 - a. Your goal in doing this is to win your brother.
 - Jesus does not want you to give up. It is too important a matter to just drop.
 - So take people that you know your brother respects—people that he will be more likely to listen to.
 - Do everything with the goal in mind of leading him to repentance.
 - b. But you have to be prepared—these witnesses may not agree with you.
 - 1) You take them along as witnesses, as Jesus says, “so that every word may be established.”
 - They are there to hear the matter and determine if your brother has sinned, and if so, to bear witness of the fact to him—
 - to confirm what you have said to him.
 - 2) But be prepared for the possibility that they will not agree with you.
 - As witnesses, they may hear the matter and conclude that your brother has not sinned and that you have falsely accused him...
 - Or if it was a quarrel, they might hear the matter and conclude that it was you who sinned against him.
 - It is their job to attest to the validity of your charges.
- But assuming that they agree with you...

2. What are you to do if your brother still refuses to hear you even when you have one or two others trying to persuade him?
 - You and the witnesses are to take your brother before the church.
 - That is what verse 17 says:
 - **Mt 18:17: And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church.**
 - a. The word in the original translated *church* is *ecclesia*.
 - This word simply means: *an assembly of called out ones*.
 - It is used of every kind of assembly...
 - from a Christian assembly called together to worship and serve Christ, to an assembly of citizens called together for a political meeting.
 - Here it refers to *the assembly of elders*—the *session*.
 - b. I say this with some degree of certainty because this was the practice in Jesus’ day in the Jewish synagogues.
 - From the time of Moses,
 - God had appointed an assembly of ruling elders to deal with such matters and to pronounce the innocence or guilt of the offending party.
 - And throughout all the cities where the Jews were scattered, it was the elders of the synagogue who bore this responsibility.
 - If the brother refused to hear the elders in the synagogue, he was to be put out of the synagogue—
 - or as Jesus says at the end of verse 17, **“Let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.”**
 - We have no reason to suppose that Jesus is introducing something different here since God had already given this job to elders in the local assembly under the Old Testament.
 - Jesus is referring to the standard practice.
 - c. And what is more, it is clear in the New Testament that elders are to be set apart in the church to serve as rulers and overseers—just as they were in the Old Testament.
 - This is clear in the book of Acts where we see Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:21-22 how Paul and Barnabas returned to the cities they had already preached to that they might strengthen those who had believed.
 - And in verse 23, it tells how they also appointed elders in every church with prayer and fasting.
 - In Titus 1, Paul instructs Titus to go to Crete where the gospel had been planted and ordain elders in every city...
 - These elders are to serve as bishops or overseers of the church—He tells of the qualifications they are to have, and speaks of how they are to rule in the church.
 - The structure that was already in place in the Old Testament assembly was to be continued in the New Testament assembly.

TRANS> But enough of the details—

3. What you see in all this is that you are to make every effort to restore your sinning brother.
 - You are to do all that is in your power to see that he is reconciled to God.
 - Our Lord Jesus does not want His people to go astray and to have the congregation to which they belong sitting by idly and doing nothing!
 - He loves us and He wants us to love one another enough to make every effort to restore anyone that is going astray.
 - He also loves His church as a whole, and does not want it to become full of those who are not following Him—that will destroy His church...
 - So if we cannot win them, the elders are to remove them.

C. Jesus explains that when the elders take such action, they are acting officially as His representatives on earth.

1. He is not on earth in bodily form now, but reigning as head of the church from heaven through the ruling elders.
 - a. When they, following the guidelines established in His word, either receive members or remove members from the church, they are speaking for heaven.
 - That is what Jesus brings out in verse 18.
 - **Mt 18:18: Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.**
 - In the original, this is what is called a future perfect periphrastic.
 - A literal translation would be,
 - **Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in Heaven.**
 - The Lord of heaven has already declared what is to be done in His Word.
 - The elders are simply speaking for Him on earth--
 - As long as the elders act in accordance with Christ's revealed will in these matters,
 - they truly speak for Him and declare what He has already determined from Heaven about the matter.
 - b. Jesus speaks of the conclusion that the elders are to reach and to declare.
 - 1) If the individual refuses to repent of his sin, they are to declare that his sin is bound to him...that it is clinging to him.
 - If a person will not repent, his sin is not forgiven, and the elders are to officially declare that.
 - 2) If the individual does repent of his sin, then they are to declare that he is forgiven.
 - They do not forgive his sin, God does, but they declare on basis of God's Word that whoever repents of his sin and looks to Christ is forgiven.
- It is a very heavy responsibility that the elders are given!
2. Jesus therefore promises to be with them as they pray and seek His will, and as they carry out these actions in His name...look at verse 19-20:

- **Mt 18:19-20: Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.**
- a. This is not just a promise for any small group prayer meeting.
 - The context is that Jesus promises to be with the elders when they are gathered in His name and act according to His word in this matter of removing those who refuse to repent.
- b. This is a great encouragement to elders!
 - It is a very hard work to remove those who will not repent—and many times there will be bitter opposition...
 - But if they earnestly pray and follow God’s word, they can take heart that Jesus is with them and is fully supporting them.
- 3. Jesus’ promise to be with them does not mean that they never err.
 - a. Sometimes they may err because they are not sincere—they may be perverted and crooked men who are acting in pride or selfishness.
 - It was the highest court of the Old Testament church that ruled that Jesus ought to be crucified.
 - It was the highest court of the church in Luther’s day that determined that Luther and his writings should be rejected as heresy.
 - Similar judgments were made against many of the prophets.
 - Often those who follow Christ will find themselves bearing His reproach in small churches that have been cut off by the establishment.
 - b. And sometimes, the elders may err even though they are sincere.
 - They may be honestly mistaken in their judgments.
- Let us digress for a moment that I might tell you what you ought to do if you believe that the elders have erred.
 - If you believe they have erred in action taken against you, you have the right to appeal to the Presbytery, and if necessary, even to the Synod!
 - Those are the terms that we use for the broader assemblies of elders.
 - Really, they are all presbyteries.
 - A presbytery is simply a body of presbyters (or elders—the Greek word for elder is *presbuteros*).
 - So what we call *the session* is *the presbytery of the local congregation* made up of the ruling elders of this church together with the minister (who himself is a ruling elder besides being a minister of the Word).
 - What we call *the presbytery* is a *regional presbytery*, made up of elders and ministers from churches that are in our region.
 - So, if wrong was done locally, the matter can be appealed so that it is taken from the local presbytery of the congregation (the session) to the regional presbytery (what we call the presbytery in our lingo).
 - There are a number of examples of such regional presbyteries in the Bible.
 - In Acts 20, Paul meets with the presbyters of the church of Ephesus—
 - Ephesus was made up of a number of local congregations, so the elders at Ephesus were a regional presbytery.

- In Acts 21, we find the presbytery at Jerusalem.
 - When Paul arrives, he meets with them.
 - They testify to the tens of thousands in Jerusalem under their care who have believed...obviously, there were many congregations.
 - And the elders from these congregations (the presbytery), meet with Paul and instruct him how to conduct himself among them.
- And there are even broader presbyteries—what we call synods.
 - Our Synod is made up of all the regional presbyteries in North America.
 - In the New Testament, we have an example of all the regional presbyteries meeting together in Acts 15 to determine whether or not the Gentiles have to be circumcised.
 - The ruling they make before the Lord is then binding on all the churches.
- This is the government established in the Bible that we follow as Presbyterians... it is government by ruling elders and ministers that is parallel to the government in the Old Testament that was by priests and ruling elders.
 - It should be understood that in the OT there were presbyteries that handled church matters, and, when Israel had their own civil government, there were also presbyteries made up of elders and officers of the king that handled civil matters.
 - In 2 Chronicles 19, King Jehoshaphat recognising ruling elders in the church as well as in the courts of the king...
 - In 2 Chronicles 19:11, he says: **“And take notice: Amariah the chief priest is over you in all matters of the LORD; and Zebadiah the son of Ishmael, the ruler of the house of Judah, for all the king’s matters; also the Levites will be officials before you. Behave courageously, and the LORD will be with the good.”**
 - When Jesus was on earth, the Romans were running the civil government, but the Jews still had their elders in each synagogue who handled church matters—
 - and they had larger courts and the Sanhedrin who were representative of all the synagogues—like our general assembly today.

TRANS> Enough digression though...I just wanted to include that so you will understand that the session does not have the final word...

- Most of the time the matter ends with the local session which is far as Jesus goes here.
- So let’s summarise what you are to do if your brother has sinned against you and does not repent.
 - First you are to go to him alone.
 - If he still refuses to repent, take someone else with you.
 - If he still refuses, take it before the elders.
 - If he still refuses, he is to be removed from the church.
- You are to make every effort to restore your brother, and you are not to give up until the matter is settled one way or another.
 - Our Lord Jesus does not take sin that is not repented of lightly and neither should we.
 - This is what ruins churches throughout history.
 - Sin is not dealt with and grows and spreads like cancer to our ruin.
- Now let us consider the second problem...

II. What if you go to your brother and he does repent but you find that you are unable to forgive him?

- A. First, we need to be sure that we are clear about what it is to forgive.
- When you forgive someone, you make a promise to that person that you will not hold his sin against him anymore.
1. That's why it is important to express forgiveness in the form of a promise.
 - a. The world simply says—
 - "I'm sorry."
 - And the other person says,
 - "That's okay."

➤ But that's not biblical talk when sin is the issue.
 - b. You should rather say,
 - "Will you forgive me?"
 - And the other person should say,
 - "Yes, I forgive you."
 - Of course there are times when you can say "I'm sorry," for example, if you spill your tea at supper or if you throw the ball to where your friend can't catch it...
 - but when you have sinned, you need to ask forgiveness.
 - When you ask someone to forgive you, you are not asking them to say, "It's okay" because sin is not okay; but you are asking them to forgive you for the wrong that you did.
 - Words are important.
 - c. And when you say, "I forgive you," you are actually making a solemn promise that you will not hold this sin against your brother any more.
 - That is what God does.
 - He promises to us in His covenant, saying:
 - "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more."
 - "I will forgive your sin and remember your iniquity no more"
 - He doesn't mean that He will suddenly get a case of divine amnesia—
 - There is no such thing as divine amnesia.
 - He rather means that He will no longer hold the sin against us.
 - Forgiveness literally means to send something away.
 - He removes it from our record so as not to be brought up against us again.
 - That is what we must do when we forgive.
 2. Notice that the focus of forgiveness is not on making *you* feel better.
 - It *does* make you feel better, but that is not the main focus!

- a. We live in a day when people are narcissistic—they focus on themselves, and many Christian books on forgiveness do that too.
 - With Jesus the whole point is on restoring your brother—on bringing him to repentance before God.
 - It is not focused on you, but on him!
- b. Biblically speaking, forgiveness always involves restoring your brother when he has sinned against you.
 - 1) When that is not the focus, people in the world (and sadly in the church) talk about forgiving someone when you don't even go to them to restore them—when you do not go to them to win them back to the Lord against whom they sinned when they sinned against you!
 - It may seem like a nice thing to just let it go—and of course there are little offenses that you should do that with—
 - but Jesus calls us to higher standard where we care enough about the other person to go and rebuke them...we want to restore their relationship with God and with ourselves.
 - It is a much harder thing to do!
 - 2) Though we often use the word *forgiveness* to refer to the proper matter of loving someone despite what they have done,
 - that is not what forgiveness is in the Bible.
 - When God forgives us, it is only when we repent.
 - His whole purpose in forgiving us is not just to remove His anger and punishment from us,
 - but to restore our relationship with Him!
 - That certainly does involve no longer holding the sin against us, but it also includes bringing us to repentance.
 - When God forgives us, He always brings us to Himself.
 - We come to Jesus for forgiveness, but we also come to be His disciples—to follow Him as a master.
 - If we are still in rebellion against Him and refuse to repent of our sin, we should not think that we have been forgiven.
 - 3) Again, this does not mean that you should harbour bitterness or resentment toward people who have wronged you until they repent.
 - You are never to do that.
 - It only means that prayer and labour need to continue for the relationship because it has not yet been restored.
 - You are to love your enemies and to do good to them—but the thing that you should want more than anything for them is that they would be reconciled to God...
 - that they would repent of their sin and be reconciled to God and find His forgiveness.
 - You can tell them that you love them and you can keep on doing good to them when they do evil to you...that is what God calls you to do...
 - but all the while you should be trying to lead them to repentance.

TRANS> But the situation that Jesus describes is one in which you have gone to your brother (or perhaps he has come to you) and he wants to be restored to you...

- Jesus has said all the through verses 15-20 that if your brother repents, you have *gained* your brother...that is the goal.

B. But let's be honest...It is not always so easy for us to just forgive our brother if his sin was against us!

1. Peter serves as our spokesman here—as he so often does.

- **Matthew 18:21: Then Peter came to Him and said, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”**
- Maybe you have been deeply wounded by what your brother did and find it hard to just let it go.
- Or maybe it was only a short time ago that you had to forgive him for the very same thing, and now, here he is again asking for your forgiveness—
 - And besides, you are the one that always has to go to him—he never comes to you!
- Peter, in admirable humility, anticipates that it will not always be as easy as Jesus makes it sound.

2. Look at how Jesus answers him...

- **Matthew 18:22: Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.”**
- He is telling Peter that he is to forgive him over and over—more times than can be counted.
 - You can picture a Pharisee getting a log book out and checking off the 490th time that someone sinned and saying, “okay, that's it!”
 - Hopefully none of you were planning anything like that.

C. But what do you do when you have tried to forgive, but you find that you just can't seem to let it go...

- when you find that you are tempted to be a talebearer and let everyone else know what the scoundrel did to you!
- Or you find that you are vindictive—
 - that you are withholding good from that brother, and maybe even tempted to do evil to him—to gossip about him, even though he has repented!
- Or you find that you are bearing a grudge—
 - that bitterness is in your heart and that you are meditating on what he has done to you—playing the tape over and over in your mind.
- What do you do then?

1. Well, Jesus gives you this most excellent parable to help you at these times.

- Instead of meditating on what your now repentant brother has done to you, meditate on this parable.
 - Jesus gave it to you to help you forgive!

2. The first man in the parable is said to owe the king 10,000 talents which would be about 60 million denarii, and the second man is said to owe the first man 100 denarii.
 - A denarius is a day's wage for a working man.
 - If we figure that a working man makes about \$100 per day,
 - that means the first man owed the king \$6 billion in our money,
 - and that the second man owed the first man about \$10,000.

TRANS> Often when this parable is told, the emphasis is on the smallness of the second man's debt.

- But if you ask me, \$10,000 seems like a pretty good sized debt!
 - A hundred day's wages is a lot for most of us and would have been for Jesus' disciples too.
 - This is *not* something that would be easy to forgive!
3. The point of the parable is not that the second man's debt was small, but that even though his debt was fairly large,
 - it was nothing in comparison to the first man's debt!
 - The lesson is that whatever great thing your brother has done against you—
 - even if it's a 10,000 dollar offence—
 - it is very small *in comparison* to what you have done to God.
 - If God has forgiven you your 6 billion dollar debt,
 - Can you not forgive your brother for his ten thousand dollar debt?
 4. Jesus adds a strong warning to you in verses 34 & 35 if you refuse to forgive your brother his debt:
 - **Matt 18:34-35: And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.**
 - Jesus shows that your refusal to forgive your brother brings you into direct conflict with God.
 - Rather than trying to remove the division, you are doing all you can to maintain it—
 - You are refusing to love.
 - Your brother repented, but you are refusing to forgive.
 - You are hating your brother in your heart rather than forgiving from the heart.
 - That means that now you have fallen into disfavour with God and are subject to His chastening until you repent.
 - And if you persist in refusing to forgive, it may even indicate that you are not a believer at all.
 - 5. My brothers and sisters, if you cannot forgive—
 - It shows that you have far too little regard for how much you have been forgiven!
 - It would appear that you have not yet grasped the greatness of God's forgiveness of you!

- Has your brother sinned against you many times?
 - Look at how many times you have sinned against God.
- Has He sinned against you in a great matter?
 - Look at how much greater your sin is against God.
- Has his sin caused you great pain and sorrow?
 - What is that compared to the great pain and sorrow that you have caused the LORD Jesus to undergo for you!

Conclusion: So you see, Jesus is ready to help us to forgive our brother.

- He knows about our struggles, and that is why He gives us this teaching.
 - He is ready to take you and lead you into the fullness of the abundant life that He has for you as one who understands His great forgiveness in such a way that it is unthinkable for you not forgive anyone who has sinned against you!
 - In fact, when you are called to forgive someone, it is actually a wonderful opportunity for you to grasp the greatness of God's forgiveness even more.
- And the same can be said about our first point...about pursuing your brother's restoration by taking others to deal with him...
 - This is the way Jesus deals with us when we have sinned.
 - He pursues us relentlessly until we repent because He loves us so much.
 - He wants us to cultivate that same love for each other.
 - That is why He gives us this instruction in Matthew 18.
 - As we saw last week, He makes us His partners on earth in pursuing those who sin to rebuke them so that they will not go away from Him.
- He is not standing over you as an angry judge because you come short...
 - He is calling you into a fuller life of obedience and faith so that you will know His zeal for your purity and His marvellous forgiveness...
 - that you might fully pursue the erring brother like He does and forgive your repentant brother like He does.