



How Can We Respond When a Christian Commits that Sin?

Brownsburg Church of Christ

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PM Assembly



Introduction:

"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife" (**I Corinthians 5:1**, ESV). We've all heard of this kind of thing happening among Christians. Perhaps we discovered that a Christian husband has been beating his wife. Or maybe we saw a sister out with a man other than her husband at a restaurant and it was obvious there was more than business going on. Or maybe someone came forward and didn't just make some general, "I haven't been living the Christian life," but named something specific: drunkenness, pornography, adultery, or homosexuality. Or maybe a brother or sister pulled you aside privately to talk and in tears told you they didn't love their spouse anymore, were struggling with staying committed to the marriage, and were even thinking about leaving. How can we respond when a Christian commits that sin?

Discussion:

I. Why this matters.

- A. The letters to the Corinthians demonstrate why proper response matters so much. It shows two different sides of improper response, probably with the same sinner. In **I Corinthians 5:1-2, 6**, Paul demonstrates the problem of being too lax and too "understanding." A man was apparently committing immorality with his step-mother, something Paul claims even the Gentiles wouldn't tolerate. Yet, the Corinthian Christians were boasting at their tolerance. Paul says they should mourn rather than boast because a little leaven leavens the whole lump. If sin is not responded to properly, it can spread throughout the congregation, dominating the lives of those who should be set free from it.
- B. On the other end of the spectrum we read **II Corinthians 2:5-11**. This is probably the same fellow who has now repented. Yet, the Corinthians were going to the other extreme in their dealing with his sins. The problem was that he might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Notice Paul ends this paragraph by reminding us of the designs or schemes of the devil. In other words, Satan will use the excessive sorrow of a fallen or restored Christian to get him or her to stay down and drop out.
- C. In other words, being lax and overly understanding can destroy the congregation through rampant sin, but going to the other extreme and being harsh and standoffish can destroy the congregation through overwhelming shame and sorrow. Thus, learning how to respond when Christians commit that sin, or any sin for that matter, really matters.
- D. If we are going to respond properly, we have to distinguish between the penitent Christian who committed that sin and the impenitent Christian. There is a difference in how we respond to the Christian who got caught looking at pornography, caught in a lie, caught embezzling money, caught cheating and the Christian who is penitently confessing. We'll examine both of these. In this lesson, we'll examine how to respond to the impenitent Christian. Next Sunday night, we'll examine how to respond to the penitent sinner.

II. The impenitent caught Christian.

- A. By impenitent, I don't mean the Christian who struggles with something and repeatedly falls to the same struggle. **Luke 17:4** deals with the repeated struggler. If he comes to us 7 times in a day asking for forgiveness, we forgive him. By impenitent, I mean one who has not expressed repentance. Either one you haven't spoken to yet or one who when spoken to continues rebelliously in the sin or asserts there is no need to change. **Matthew 18:15-17** provides an outline for how to respond to this sin in four steps.
- B. Step #1: "Go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone" (**Matthew 18:15**, ESV).
 1. Perhaps you witnessed the sin or have heard about it. Or maybe it was specifically against you. In any event, your response is not to fire off an e-mail to the elders or the preacher. Your response is not to call mutual friends and tell them about it. Your response is not to ignore it reveling in your understanding and tolerance as the Corinthians did at first. Your response is to go and talk to them about it. By the way, I want to emphasize, go and talk to them about it. Do not e-mail them, text them, or Facebook them about it. Go and talk to them about it.
 2. Sadly, all too often, this is all the direction we give about this part of the process. However, I'd like to look at the greater context of this passage to learn something about our private approach to our broth-

er or sister. Jesus's teaching on restoring a brother follows on the heels of the story of the 1 sheep and the 99 sheep. What did the shepherd do? He left the 99 to seek and save the lost sheep. His goal was salvation and restoration to the fold. Following this teaching about restoring a brother, Jesus told the story of the unforgiving servant, who despite the great forgiveness he had received from the king, he couldn't find it in his heart to forgive his fellow servant. The story ends with Jesus's summary: "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (**Matthew 18:35**, ESV). We don't go to our brother or sister in private to put them in their place. We don't go to blast them. We don't go to show them who's boss. We don't go to prove we are a better person. We go to win them back, to restore them, to save them. We go for the purpose of being able to forgive them when they repent.

3. With the above in mind we need to consider our attitude and mindset towards even impenitent sinners. We aren't hoping to kick them out of the church because they make us look bad. We are going in hope that they will be restored showing God's power to forgive. Thus, in **Galatians 6:1**, Paul explains that we must restore a fallen Christian with a spirit of gentleness. Gentleness is a submissive attitude that surrenders our rights to the good of others. I think perhaps the best way to accomplish this gentle attitude is found in **Titus 3:1-7**. Certainly, that passage is talking about how we respond to the rebellious sinners still in the world. How much more should we behave this way with our brethren who are struggling with sin? Notice what it explains. We approach others who have sinned with a healthy memory of our own sinfulness. We remember that we have done the same kind of thing as our fallen friend dozens, even hundreds of times. Furthermore, we know that any difference of behavior that now stands is because of God's grace, not because of us. Therefore, we do not meet with our fallen brother or sister from a position of spiritual superiority, but from a position of having been there and done that. We just want to help restore the relationship.

C. Step #2: "take one or two others along with you" (**Matthew 18:16**, ESV).

1. If your brother or sister repents when you go to them privately, you've won them. Rejoice with them and then refer to what we will say later about responding to the penitent. On the other hand, if they remain in impenitent rebellion against God, we take another step. We take one or two with us as witnesses to confirm the impenitence. This actually harkens back to the Old Law requirements found in **Deuteronomy 19:15**. No congregational action should take place on the basis of only one witness.
2. Please understand what this is. This is not simply bringing along two "yes men" who will go along with whatever you say. This is taking along one or two to confirm your concern. It may actually be that when they witness the interaction they don't confirm it but have to correct you. If the sin was between you and the other person, they may also act as mediators who can resolve the conflict and bring repentance and reconciliation between you.
3. Please notice an important point here. Jesus wants you to keep the circle of knowledge on this issue as small as it needs to be to bring about repentance. We don't go by ourselves and then start broadcasting when the person doesn't respond as we want.

D. Step #3: "tell it to the church" (**Matthew 18:17**, ESV).

1. If the fallen brother or sister listens to you and your witnesses, then you have won them. Rejoice and refer to what we'll learn about responding to penitent sinners. Sadly, sometimes they won't listen. In that case, we get the congregation involved. Though Jesus doesn't spell out exactly how to do this, I believe the best way is to bring your witnesses to the shepherds. Lay out your case to them. As shepherds over the congregation, they can best determine how to share the information with the entire group.
2. But notice that this sharing is not the same as marking or withdrawing. Rather, this is done to win the brother or sister. This is done to activate the congregation to actively strive to gently restore the brother or sister. When this kind of announcement is made, it is not merely a rote precursor to withdrawal so the rest of us can sit around and await that announcement. Rather, it is intended to get us on our knees in prayer for the brother or sister. Further, it is intended to get us talking to the brother or sister, encouraging them to restore their relationship with Jesus.

E. Step #4: "let him be to you as a Gentile and tax collector" (**Matthew 18:17**, ESV).

1. To the Jews, Gentiles and tax collectors were anathema. They didn't want to be around them. Jesus says the impenitent rebellious sinner is to be treated in a similar way to the Gentile and tax collector. Paul describes this in **I Corinthians 5:9-13**. We are not supposed to associate with a fallen brother or sister who has refused to respond to the gentle restoration of his brothers and sisters. Paul demonstrates that we are not even to eat with this Christian. That is, the association we have with our brothers and sisters

is to be cut off. When we throw a party, they don't get invited. When we have a social gathering, they are not to be part of it. When we have a social outing, they are not to go along. That part of the friendship is to be cut off and severed. Not because we are punishing the fallen, but because they need to see in a physical representation what their sin has done spiritually.

2. Having demonstrated the above, we do need to understand another side of this Gentile and tax collector treatment. How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? Do you remember the story of Zacchaeus in **Luke 19:1-10**? Jesus saw the tax collectors as someone to be sought after and saved. And aren't you glad that He saw Gentiles as people to die for? It is true that we are to sever the common association we have with impenitent, rebellious Christians. However, they are not enemies, they are prisoners of war. Satan has captured them and we need to turn all of our efforts to winning them. No, that doesn't mean we invite them to the parties to show them how loving we can be. But it does mean we do not abandon them to their sins. We follow up. We call and visit. We seek. When we see them, we dare not cross to the other side of the street and ignore them. We talk to them about their souls. In **II Thessalonians 3:14-15**, Paul explains that while we have nothing to do with this person, we do not treat them as enemies, but warn them as brothers.
3. The point of this action is not to kick out people who don't measure up. None of us measure up. The point is not to get rid of the bad apples. We're all bad apples. The point is not to prove we are good or better. Only God is good. The point is not get rid of the people who make the church look bad. If someone investigated our lives, we'd all make the church look bad. The purpose is twofold. 1) To remove an influence that will let sin dominate the congregation. 2) To bring the fallen to repentance and reconciliation with Jesus Christ. We must keep these in mind.

Conclusion:

In our next Sunday evening lesson, we'll examine the second part of this. How can we respond to the penitent Christian who commits that sin? Please remember that none of this is about trying to simply dot some Is and cross some Ts of some organizational flow chart. This is about helping people be in a relationship with Jesus Christ. Too many want to bicker about rules on this process hoping that if they can keep a congregation from announcing a withdrawal that somehow that makes a fallen brother or sister okay with God. That is simply not so. We need to not be so concerned about the technicalities as we are the souls involved. When a Christian is in impenitent sin, our protestations to congregational policies won't change that. We need to respond appropriately, for the sake of the congregation, for the sake of the fallen Christian, and for the Lord's sake. How are you responding?