



## How Can We Respond When a Christian Commits that Sin? Part 2

Brownsburg Church of Christ

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### Introduction:

Sin happens. It happens to Christians. As we have learned, Christians are not immune to sin, Satan is attacking us even harder, and we are growing, not perfect. Therefore, sins happen even among us. How do we deal with that? In a previous lesson, we examined how we can respond to the impenitent caught Christian. But what about a penitent Christian? What about a confessing Christian? How can we respond when a brother “comes forward”? How can we respond when a sister calls us up or tells us in a group about their sins? How can we respond when a brother calls us in their moment of temptation seeking help? **James 5:16** encourages us to confess to one another; how can we respond when a brother or sister takes that exhortation seriously and decides to confess to us?

### Discussion:

#### I. Why this matters

- A. Last week, we learned from **I Corinthians 5:1-2, 6-7**, that when we are tolerant of sin, Christ’s congregation can be destroyed by the rampant spread of sin. On the other hand, **II Corinthians 2:7** explains that if we are too harsh, Christ’s congregation can be destroyed by excessive shame and sorrow. Brothers and sisters, believing they will never make it or overcome, will abandon the Lord in defeat. If we do not respond properly, we won’t be preserving or purifying the Lord’s church, we will be destroying the Lord’s church.
- B. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about how many churches deal with sin and sinners in their midst. Before I share this quote: yes, I know there is a difference between us in Christ and sinners in the world. This quote is not intended to suggest we turn a blind eye to impenitent sin (as I hope was well demonstrated in our previous lesson). Nor is it suggesting that people who enter Christ make sin a lifestyle as folks in the world. It simply acknowledges that because Christians are growing, they still struggle with sin.

“Confess your sins to one another” (James 5:16). Those who remain alone with their evil are left utterly alone. It is possible that Christians may remain lonely in spite of daily worship together, prayer together, and all their community through service—that the final breakthrough to community does not occur precisely because they enjoy community with one another as pious believers, but not with one another as those lacking piety, as sinners. For the pious community permits no one to be a sinner. Hence all have to conceal their sins from themselves and from the community. We are not allowed to be sinners. Many Christians would be unimaginably horrified if a real sinner were suddenly to turn up among the pious. So we remain alone with our sin, trapped in lies and hypocrisy, for we are in fact sinners (Life Together, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Tr. Daniel Bloesch and James Burtness, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2005, p. 108).

- C. This matters because if we do not know how to respond to penitent, struggling, confessing, sinning Christians, we leave each other alone with our sins. We leave each other trapped in hypocrisy and lies. We leave each other trapped with Satan. We leave each other, the very people promised freedom from sin by Jesus Christ, without the help Jesus has offered us from this relationship called the church to accomplish that victory. How would you expect a nurse at the local emergency room to act if someone walked in and admitted they were having a heart attack? We need to remember that we are a hospital, not a resort hotel. This is where sick people congregate to be made well, not where well people congregate in order to hang out. Like the nurse at the hospital, we must learn to respond appropriately for everyone’s benefit.
- D. **II Corinthians 2:5-11** shows the four steps of responding to the penitent confessing Christian.

#### II. The Penitent Confessing Christian (**II Corinthians 2:5-11**)

##### A. Forgive<sup>1</sup>

1. Paul says we need to forgive. This is especially important if the sin they are confessing was against us in particular. Understand the forgiveness is more than simply saying, “I accept your apology.” Offering forgiveness is more than words. It is a decision. Forgiving is not the same as forgetting. Forgetting is a passive activity that happens over time. Forgiving is also more than a feeling. Sometimes our feelings aren’t quite in line with the decision of forgiveness, especially if the sin particularly hurt us. Forgiveness is a decision to treat others’ sins the way God has treated ours. Neither is forgiveness excusing sin. Rather, forgiveness is looking sin square in its face and dealing with it in a godly way.

<sup>1</sup> Much of this point is adapted from Ken Sande’s The Peacemaker, pp. 206-210.

2. **Psalm 103:3, 8-12** demonstrates the forgiveness we have received from God with our own sinfulness. We need to offer this exact same kind of forgiveness to our brethren who confess to us and seek our forgiveness. Notice five decisions and commitments we are making when we forgive.
  - a) *I will not dwell on this incident*: The text says God will not keep His anger forever. That is, He doesn't dwell on what was an angering event. He doesn't rehearse it over and over again in His mind.
  - b) *I will not bring this incident up again to use it against you*: The text says God will not always chide us. Some translations say He will not strive with us or constantly accuse us. Certainly, in the case of some repetitious sins, there is a time to bring up past occurrences demonstrating a pattern. However, in these cases, when done properly we are not using the past sins against someone, but to help them. However, in most cases, saying we forgive means we don't bring it up ever again. We don't remind them of it when we are upset with them or even to remind them how much they owe us.
  - c) *I will not talk to others about this incident*: The word translated "chide" in the ESV can have the meaning of contending against as in a court of law. This is like bringing the incident up to other people so they can preside over someone's innocence or guilt. We are committing not to do that.
  - d) *I will not punish you over this incident*: The text says God won't deal with us according to our sins or repay us according to our iniquities. When someone sins, they do deserve punishment. But God forgives us in Jesus Christ rather than punishing us. When we forgive others, we are committing to avoid punishment, to not treat them based on their iniquities. Sin incurs debt. Forgiveness says we won't make the other person pay the debt. We often exact payment through punishment, threats, vengeance, being cold and aloof, giving up on the relationship, turning our backs on the person, gossiping, slandering, causing emotional pain, demanding restitution, holding them at arm's length until they prove themselves worthy of different treatment, etc. Forgiveness is not avoiding these things by saying the sin doesn't matter. Rather, forgiveness is admitting the sin matters very much. However, rather than exacting these payments from the sinner, we will make the payment. We will take the hurt. We will accept the wrong. Just like God did for us through Jesus on the cross.
  - e) *I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship*: The text says God removes our sins from us as far as the east is from the west. When He looks at us, He no longer sees our sins. This is important because **Isaiah 59:1-2** says it is our sins that separate us from Him. When He forgives us, He removes our sins from us, removing the separation.
3. This is why it is so important for us to do more than simply talk in terms of apologies when sin comes between us in the congregation (or any other relationship for that matter). We need to speak in terms of seeking forgiveness and granting forgiveness. Forgiveness means so much more than overlooking. We need to understand what it means to forgive and when our brethren penitently confess their sins seeking forgiveness, we need to give it to them (cf. **Luke 17:3**).

#### B. Comfort

1. In **II Corinthians 2:7**, not only are we to forgive, we are to comfort. As Paul taught in **I Thessalonians 5:11, 14**, we are to encourage/comfort one another, even comforting the fainthearted strugglers. The wounded Christian needs comforting from those to whom he/she confesses. Sadly, usually the wounded Christian just gets aloof reminders of God's law. Trust me, if someone is pulling you aside confessing that they have been lusting, lying, cheating, stealing, or whatever, they already know it is against God's law. That is why they feel the guilt that has pushed them to seek help from you through confession. They don't need pronouncements from on high that what they did is wrong. They already know that.
2. The word translated "comfort" literally means to "call alongside." In fact, it is often used to refer to calling someone to come alongside and listen to what you are saying. In this context of comfort and encouragement it is a picture not of asking someone to walk beside you literally, but to walk beside you spiritually and emotionally. It is not comforting to speak to the sinning Christian from a position on high and above them. Rather, comforting means to come alongside as a fellow traveler. It means to empathize and put yourself in their shoes, letting them see you put yourself in their shoes. It means admitting you've actually been in their shoes. You may not have committed the particular sin they are struggling with, but you have sinned. You have had to confess and find forgiveness and comfort.
3. Here are some things that are not comforting: acting so shocked that anyone would ever commit such an awful sin; questioning their love for God; telling them in superiority that you've never had a problem with that sin; comparing them to others; questioning them with surprise about how they could ever do such a thing when they know God's will; and simply asking them or telling them to just stop.

4. Here are some responses that are comforting: letting them know that they are doing the right thing by confessing and seeking help (cf. **James 5:16**); letting them know that you've been there and understand (cf. **Romans 7:13-24**; **I Timothy 1:15**); reminding them of God's love for them demonstrated by Jesus on the cross while they were still sinners (cf. **Romans 5:6-8**); reminding them of the hope of victory we have in Christ; remind them that God is working on their behalf to save them and establish them in Christ (cf. **I Peter 5:10**); let them know that their call and confession helps you remember how much you need Jesus and His strength; reminding them of stories of fallen saints in the Bible and their forgiveness and victory found in God (e.g. David and Peter); sharing your own experience, strength, and hope from your struggles with and victories over sin; reminding them of their progress and victories. Sometimes just listening, mourning with them, and giving them a hug is one of the most comforting things you can do. You don't always have to advise them. Sometimes you just need to listen.

C. Reaffirm love

1. In **II Corinthians 2:8**, Paul takes our response a step further, claiming we need to reaffirm our love for the sinner. This is the "agape" unconditional love we have heard so many lessons about. It is the love that caused God to send His Son to die for our sins despite our sins. It is the love that caused Him to forgive our sins in Jesus and comfort us with the Holy Spirit. It is the love that caused Him to reconcile us to Himself. It is the love that doesn't allow anything to come in between. It is this love that God first gave to us, so we turn and give it to others (**I John 4:19**). Keep in mind when Paul wrote this to the Corinthians, he had sent them a prior letter defining this love in **I Corinthians 13:4-7**. This definition includes not boasting, being rude, or being resentful and embittered. It does not keep count of wrongs suffered. It rejoices with truth and practices patience and kindness. It believes and hopes all things while bearing and enduring all things. Reaffirm that love to the brother or sister.
2. The word translated "reaffirm" in the ESV is used in only one other place in the New Testament: **Galatians 3:15**. That instance gives us interesting insight into this word. There it is the word "ratified," talking about the ratification of a covenant. In other words, this is more than just saying, "I love you." This is ratifying that love. That is, reaffirming the love through action. What better way to reaffirm or ratify your love than to put yourself at the service of the struggling Christian. Too often we tell the confessing Christian how much we love them and appreciate their example, then we drop them like a hot potato, hoping they won't start calling us too often and taking too much of our time. We need to do more than reaffirm our love in word, we need to ratify it in deed (cf. **I John 3:18**).

D. Repeat

1. This point doesn't come from **II Corinthians 2** so much as it does from **Luke 17:3-4**. Jesus said, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying 'I repent,' you must forgive him" (ESV).
2. In my experience, no one has a bad reputation in most churches like the repeat offender who comes forward on multiple occasions. Folks give hugs and encouraging words to that brother or sister's face, but on the way home in the car and over lunch with their friends wonder aloud what is wrong with that brother or sister. When are they going to straighten up? In these moments, Christians seem to forget the number of sins they should probably bring to the brethren on a repeated basis.
3. No doubt, we want to say repetition demonstrates a lack of real repentance. However, it appears that Jesus is telling us to let God deal with that. Our job is to respond to the confession and expressed repentance even if it happens again and again. God can deal with the heart; that is not our purview.
4. Since we are all still struggling and growing, it stands to reason this whole process is going to happen again and again. Sometimes it will be over repetitions of the same sin. Other times, it will be over different sins. The point, however, is there is no limitation. We repeat this process as often as needed. After all, since we are not keeping track of wrongdoing, each instance is as the first.

Conclusion:

We often talk about being the hands and feet of Jesus. After all, the church is His body. That means we are actually the visible manifestation of His love and forgiveness. Here is why what we've talked about in this lesson is so important. Very often, the only way our brothers and sisters will witness the actual forgiveness offered them by God through Jesus Christ is when they see it acted out by us. It is important for us to be a great reflector of God's love and forgiveness. Many people are basing their reaction to God on our reaction to them. Let's deal with their penitence the same way God does so that they will not be overcome with sorrow and shame, but overwhelmed with love, forgiveness, and joy.