

TELL IT TO THE CHURCH

by Ray C. Stedman

Today we must do what we have had to do only three previous times in the 36-year history of Peninsula Bible Church. That is to obey the word of our Lord Jesus given in Matthew 18 concerning the handling of a serious moral failure in a member of this church. The passage begins with Verse 15:

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." {Matt 18:15-18 RSV}

As we go through these words together let us remember that these are the words of Jesus, and, as such, they cannot be ignored. He is the Lord of the church, the Head of the body, and, as such, is dealing here with the procedure for handling unjudged sin in our midst.

It is clear in this passage that our Lord is dealing with a situation where sin has not been acknowledged as such. The normal way to handle sin in a Christian's life, since we all sin, is to judge it ourselves, to become aware by the ministry of the Word of God, or, perhaps, by observation of someone else's life that something we are doing is clearly, unmistakably wrong, and to judge it, and stop it. This kind of judging must go on in all our lives. Where it does there is no disciplinary action required. But our Lord is dealing here with those cases where, for one reason or another, we do not judge ourselves. Here he describes the process to be followed. This is not a single act, it is a process which involves four steps which are to take place over a period of time.

1. The first stage is a private meeting: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." (The words *against you* are not in some of the better manuscripts, and many texts leave them out.) What this is really saying is, "if your brother sins, period" -- i.e., if your brother (or your sister) is clearly violating by his actions something that the Word of God says is wrong, and does not do anything about it, we are to go to him and tell him his fault between the two of us.

This, of course, is quite contrary to the spirit of the age. The world around constantly tells us that what an individual does in his private life is nobody else's business. In this election year we are being told that a politician's private life is nobody's business but his own (or her own), and we are not to judge or even take account of what kind of life he leads when we vote. But this is not true in the church. The church is a body, and members of that body belong one to another. Perhaps no two words appear more frequently in the Scripture than those words, *one another*. We are to do many things to *one another*, and one of them is to help *one another* when we do not see or recognize that what we are doing is wrong.

Notice that our Lord specifically says it involves a question of sin -- and sin is defined by the Word of God. Jesus is not saying, "If your brother irritates you, or offends you, or ignores you, you are to go to him about that." There is another great word in the Christian life that covers irritations: it is the word *forbearance*. We are to bear with one another. We all irritate each other, and offend one another, and when we do we are to *forbear one another*; we are to put up with it, to forgive it without saying anything about it to the person involved. But this passage is dealing with sins, and sins are defined for

us in the Scripture.

In the letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul sets forth some of the clearly sinful things that we Christians tend to do to one another.

Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

But fornication and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints. Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity, which are not fitting; but instead let there be thanksgiving. (Eph.4:25-5:4 {RSV})

That is a representative list of some of the things that the Word of God defines as sin.

At this first meeting we are to go, as Paul instructs in the book of Galatians, in the spirit of meekness {cf, Gal 6:1}, not self-righteously, not harshly, not with condemnation. Aware of our own vulnerability, we are to go to an individual, and say, "The Scriptures say that what you are doing is wrong. What do you think about it? You read the Bible. What does it say?" Thus we are to seek to lay hold of the individual's conscience and restore him to a spirit of repentance.

Notice this word in Matthew 18 is addressed to all Christians, not merely church leaders, elders, or pastors. This is to go on all the time between believers wherever we see someone refusing to judge a wrong thing in his or her life.

I want to say that this does happen here at PBC. Hardly a week goes by that someone in this congregation is not doing this with someone else. That shows a care and love for someone else and a desire to help. But only when we go in a spirit of awareness of our own vulnerability is it a valid approach.

Jesus continues, "If your brother hears you," i.e., if he accepts what you point out to him, and ceases his sin, there is to be no further action. No one else is to know about it; we are not to talk to anyone about it. It is not subject for any further action by anyone. If your brother does not hear you, however, then others become involved.

2. Our Lord moves to the second step: "But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses." The bringing of others into the situation is clearly designed to impress the erring brother or sister with the seriousness of sin.

This second step is pointing out that this sin cannot be ignored. We cannot shrug our shoulders, and say, "Oh, well, that is his business. Forget about it." Others are to become involved. This kind of thing may occur several times, in a loving attempt to lay hold of someone's conscience, and awaken him to the danger in which he has put himself spiritually, and the hurt he is inflicting upon others. The witnesses, of course, serve to keep tempers down, and to keep the reports of the meeting accurate in case anything further needs to be done. If this works, if, when confronted with two or three, the brother or sister who is erring listens, and ceases his sinful behavior, then nothing further need be done. Discipline has achieved its objective and forgiveness comes in.

3. But, Jesus declares, if there is still no repentance, then a third step must be taken: "If he refuses to

listen to them, tell it to the church." This is the step to which we have come this morning regarding a certain situation in our own midst: We must tell it to the church.

The reason for this is that the whole congregation may become involved in an attempt to reach the offender. It is not that we tell people in order that they might turn their backs on the individual or refuse to have anything to do with him. We are not to come as holier-than-thou judges or finger-pointing condemners, but as fellow-pleaders for a change of heart, urging the individual in question to permanently cease from the sinful actions involved.

There are several ways to do this. If you ask, "What can a congregation actually do at this stage?"

1. I would say, first, pray for the offender. Prayer is everywhere urged in Scripture as a powerful weapon to change people's thinking and attitudes. Pray that God will grant repentance to the offender, that God will so move that he will turn and recover himself from the snare of the devil. And pray for those who have been hurt by the sin. Other innocent ones are always involved and they are being damaged and hurt; we need to support them and love them in prayer. So if you cannot do anything else, pray for such a one.

In our bulletin this morning there is a notice about a special prayer meeting to be held here this week for prayer for this situation and any others that may be among us. We invite you to come for that purpose.

2. Then the second thing a congregation can do is to express love and concern to the individual involved. Urge him to repent, to give up sin, and to give in to the pleadings of the body and of the Spirit of God. Especially is this true of people who are friends of the individual and have known him for a long period of time. The cooperative effort of many to help the one involved see what he or she has done is a very powerful weapon to turn him from evil.
3. Thirdly, individuals in a congregation can share with this person experiences they themselves may have had of finding God's grace sufficient in their own lives to resist evil, or to turn from it, once it has been discovered or indulged in. That will encourage the individual to realize that the only way out of his situation is to return to the Lord, who will forgive.

If this works (and some time must be allowed to permit it to work), then nothing more needs to be done. There is no need to bring the person before the congregation, demanding he tell the whole story, etc. There is no embarrassment or any public humiliation required. The purpose of all discipline is restoration, recovery, repentance.

4. But if the offender continues in sin, and resists all pleas, Jesus sets out a final and fourth step which must be taken: "If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." In the culture of that day that was equivalent to saying that he was an unbeliever, not a Christian at all; that he had, by his deeds, declared himself not to be truly a believer, a genuine, submitted believer in the Lord. What is suggested here is that the whole congregation look upon the individual differently. This does not require any kind of punishment. There are no penalties assessed. There is no attempt to humiliate the individual. The congregation begins to regard him as an unbeliever.

In his letter to Titus, Paul refers to certain men, of whom he says,

Their very minds and consciences are corrupted. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their deeds; {Tit 1:15-16a RSV}

If one has resisted the attempts of many to bring him to a knowledge of truth, then this is the condition into which he has allowed himself to fall. He is to be treated, therefore, as we would treat any unbeliever in our midst -- with courtesy, yet with sorrow for the sin and the hurt he is bringing on himself, but with hope for his ultimate redemption.

- He is not to have any role of leadership in the church, or any teaching ministry within it.
- He is not to be recognized as being a believer; his deeds declare that he is not what he professes to be.

At this point we must take Verse 18 very seriously. Our Lord underlines it with an introductory word, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." What does that mean? Well, it means that God will act when and where the church can no longer act. When a church has followed carefully and lovingly through this whole program of redemption described here, and has arrived at the fourth step, that is all the church can do. Human effort to recover an individual can go no further. But God can go further, that is the point. What the church has done by faithfully obeying its Lord, God will continue to do in his own sovereign way in bringing about events and circumstances that will bear upon that person's conscience to make him see how wrong he is. If the offender is truly a Christian -- as he may well be, despite the fact that his deeds do not support his profession -- then he will be chastened by a loving Father.

There are many passages in Scripture, most notably Hebrews 12 and 13, for instance, that speak of this. That chastening can be ruthless. A loving Father can at times be very hard on someone whom he seeks to turn from an evil pathway. This is what the Apostle Paul refers to in First Corinthians as "being delivered unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus," {1 Cor 5:5 RSV}. God does that, and it can be very painful. One of our members who went through this very process of discipline some years ago and has been restored to us and recovered by God's grace told me that in the years in which he was walking away from the church, away from the body of Christ and under the discipline of this passage, he went through a literal hell on earth. He found himself tremendously distressed -- he had psychotic experiences that frightened the living daylight out of him. God can deal very ruthlessly with one of his own.

Now it may be that the offender has never been a Christian. In that case, God may allow him to live out his days on earth rather peacefully and ultimately face the judgment that awaits him, as it does all who come to the end of their lives. In any event, it is in God's hands. The church is not required to take any further action.

Now we come to the moment that I intensely dislike. This has not been an academic study, as I am sure you realize. We have an actual case before us that requires this action. So with great sorrow and personal pain I must reveal the name to you and the sin of the offender whom we have been speaking of this morning. Let me say that this has been compounded in agony for all of us by the fact that this man has been an elder of this congregation for over 10 years; he has been a Bible teacher and a counselor among us. I refer to our brother, John Watkins.* About eight months ago, information reached us that he was involved in an extra-marital affair. One of our pastors met with him concerning this situation and the man admitted to this. He admitted it not only to this pastor at that first meeting, but, subsequently, several times to all of us. In talking with him, it came to light that this had been going on for a number of years. Further, because this was a financial drain upon him, he used his position as an elder to borrow extensively from several people in this congregation and has thus contracted a heavy debt under essentially false pretenses.

Though at the first meeting he was repentant, submitted himself to the elders' counsel, sought forgiveness from his wife and began the repayment of this debt, we have in recent days learned that he is still involved with the other woman and is unwilling to break off this affair. So we come reluctantly, painfully and sorrowfully to seek the involvement of the church, to ask all who know him to seek to turn him, to reach his conscience and deliver him.

The Apostle Paul instructs us in First Timothy concerning an elder:

Never admit any charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. {1 Tim 5:19-20 RSV}

Today we are simply attempting to be obedient to those words. We do so out of a deep sense of our own vulnerability. There is not one of us who could not have fallen into the same condition had we not taken hold of the resources that were provided to all in the Word and by the Spirit.

I am sure many of you have questions about this. Perhaps someone is saying, "How can this happen? How can a man to whom leadership is entrusted, who understands and is even teaching the Scriptures, who does personal counseling, how can he allow himself to be involved in such a thing as this?" The answer, of course,

which is everywhere given in Scripture is, the deceitfulness of sin. Sin has a strange power to deceive us and to make us justify what we are doing.

I recently ran across an article written by Dr. Erwin Lutzer, the pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. In it, he points out some of the popular lies of today that we often use to justify evil. Here is one of them:

We often allow ourselves to think that God is unfair in giving us passions and then restricting their fulfillment. We say, "I have this strong sex drive. I am not being adequately satisfied and I feel I have to do this." That is a lie. That is saying that our moods and our feelings are to govern us. Never in Scripture do we find that we are to allow our feelings to be in charge of our conscience. It is the other way around. God provides power for us, if we choose to use it.

Another widespread lie today is that, by careful planning, we can sin secretly without harm. That, of course, denies the word of Scripture that God cannot be mocked. He knows what we are doing. It cannot be hidden from him. He has ordained that "if we sow to the flesh, we shall of the flesh reap corruption," {cf, Gal 6:8a}. Nothing can change that. Nothing can evade it. It is equally true that "if we sow to the Spirit, we shall of the Spirit reap life," {cf, Gal 6:8b}. Nothing can change that. To believe we can sin in secret without penalty is a Satanic lie which permits us to go on in evil and into dangerous involvements that are extremely hurtful. We will find ourselves under the chastening hand of God.

A third lie is that a great enough pleasure is worth any discipline that God may impose as a result. But what a terrible deceit that is! You would agree if you could see, as some of us have seen, the terrible hurt that comes into a life that seeks to deliberately disobey the Word of God. No one can imagine how much it is going to cut and hurt and pain not only the individual, but others as well. The degree to which that happens is often incredible. If it be true, as Scripture declares, that we are sowing a seed, then the harvest is always greater than the sowing. Thus we can only fool ourselves when we think it is going to be worth the pleasure that we experience.

Another lie is that we can live in a world of fantasy and still be committed Christians. Many among us, I am afraid, indulge themselves in fantasies, thought-sins, in playing with evil, thinking that because no one else can see it they are not being hurt by it. But our Lord Jesus informs us very clearly that even if we lust in our hearts we have committed adultery; and that too will be brought to light. Now it does not mean that a passing thought is itself a sinful deed. But if we play with it, if we deliberately bring it to our mind, if we seek after it and feed it with pornographic and erotic literature we are exposing ourselves to the judgment of God. We must firmly reject these lies and get on with living the truth as God has called us.

Someone else may say, "Why are we treating this so seriously? This is common in the world today. It is even common in the church today. Why do we take it so seriously?" The answer, of course, is, because the Word of God takes it seriously. The reason it does so is because any degree of sexual misbehavior directly attacks the most fundamental institution among mankind, and that is marriage. God takes that very seriously because marriage is at the root of proper social behavior. Marriage constitutes the warp and woof of the fabric of society. When marriages begin to fall apart, as they have to a considerable degree in the last decades, the whole society begins to crumble. This is the explanation for the skyrocketing rises in drug addiction, homosexuality, moral breakdown, corruption in politics, etc., on every side. The underlying structure, the foundations of national life are disappearing. Thus God deals very seriously with this, and we must do so as well.

This is not easy to do. I personally dislike intensely what I'm doing now. But it must be done if we are to be obedient to the Word of God. So on behalf of the elders of this congregation I would urge you all to join us in trying

- To reach our brother,
- To help him to see how serious this is, and
- To help him recover.

We want to see him forgiven and restored, the improper liaison ended, and to be back again with his brothers

and sisters in Christ. To that end we ask your involvement and your prayer.

This has been a sobering meeting. I cannot think of anything more fitting by way of closing than to stand quietly together and to commit this matter to the Lord in prayer.

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, we are made aware by this passage of the purity of the church, of the holiness of our Lord, of the evil that destroys among us, of the cleverness of the devil in tricking and deceiving us by attractive lies. Forgive us all, Lord, and help us to be loving, faithful members one of another. We pray for our brother. We pray you will restore him, that you will deal with him, that this need not go to that last and final stage of being delivered unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh. We pray for his wife and his children, that you will uphold them and strengthen them in this time. May we together share not only in the pain, but also, ultimately, in the recovery, and rejoice in your grace and in your mercy to us. We commit this, then, into your loving hands that you may do as seems best in your eyes. In Jesus' name. Amen.

* The name has been changed to protect those involved.

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