

# OpenTheo

## Reconciliation (Part 1)



### **The Life and Teachings of Christ** - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg discusses the importance of reconciliation within the Christian community. He emphasizes the need to handle interpersonal conflicts internally, rather than turning to outside sources like the court system. Gregg asserts that the goal of confronting someone who has sinned against another person should be to bring about repentance, rather than condemnation. He also warns against the pitfalls of judgmentalism and urges Christians to turn away from those who persist in sinful behavior.

### **Transcript**

Turn now to Matthew 18. In our last session, we covered the first 14 verses. I now want to take the remainder of the chapter.

Matthew 18, 15 is therefore where we will begin. The passage is often quoted, it seems to me. Now, I don't know if it's been a very well-known passage at all times in church history, partly because I'm not enough in touch with the writings of every period of church history.

But it seems to me that in the last decade or so, everybody has heard this passage. Now, if you haven't, or if you're not familiar with it, then maybe we're just in different circles and I'm not getting a clear reading on what's commonly known and what isn't. But in areas where there are relational problems among Christians, it seems to me that those who are interested in being biblical often turn to this passage.

Because it's a key passage where Jesus gives specific, not just general principles about forgiveness or general principles about absorbing injuries or general principles about being good, but where he gives specific procedural dictates about what to do in restoring a relationship that's been injured by somebody's sinning against you. And it's the only passage that's really quite like it, this specific. So anyone who's involved in pastoral work and dealing with people who've had relationship breaks, almost always a relationship break is the result of somebody sinning.

And, you know, therefore when brought to... maybe the reason it's so familiar to me is a

lot of people I associate with are pastors and people who do serve on staff in ministries and things like that. But this passage always is sort of the guiding text in counseling people who have had relationship problems. But it should not only be well known to those who give such counsel to people, but it should be a governing text in the way that we handle our individual relationships.

We shouldn't even have to go to counselors to handle these kind of problems because Jesus is the wonderful counselor. He's already given his counsel here. If we would familiarize ourselves with the things that he said, it would clear up a great number of things that are otherwise muddled.

I'm talking, of course, principally about verses 15 through 17. Jesus said, 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.

But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

Now, we're going to assume for now that the word brother refers to a fellow believer. It cannot be established with certainty that that's the narrow range that Jesus meant. There is a sense in which he might have meant any human being.

However, I think not. It seems to be a fellow Christian that he has in mind. And the reason for that is that the person in question is to be brought before the church.

And if he won't hear the church, he's supposed to be treated as if he were a heathen. The implication being that he was not considered to be a heathen previously. You would not be able, for example, to take your next door neighbor before the church for discipline if he was not a part of the church.

He could hardly be expected to be concerned at all with what the church thought of him if the church was no part of his concern in his life. Obviously, the idea that taking someone before the church would have teeth in it would suggest that the parties both in the discourse are Christians or professing Christians. Now, this verse 15, if your brother sins against you, is a counterpart to something in Matthew chapter 17 which we should take a look at.

Because actually, Luke 17 has other parallels in it to the passage in Matthew 18. In fact, I point out to you that Matthew 18 appears to be a patching together of various things Jesus said about similar subjects. On Matthew's part, patching them together the way he did, and that Jesus said all these things we don't question, that he said them all at once we might question, especially in view of the way that they are arranged, all the same

sayings are arranged, although in some cases slightly modified in other parts of the Gospels.

For example, in Matthew 18, we encountered verses 6 and 7 in our last session. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses, for offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes.

If you look at Luke 17, those are the opening statements of that chapter. And while Matthew 18 does not immediately go on to talk about what you should do if your brother sins against you, we see that Matthew 18 does so in verse 15. It's not immediately connected to the issue of woe to those who offend, but it's in the same chapter, and in Luke 17 this is also the case.

Because after Luke 17 verses 1 and 2 give the indictment on those who would cause little ones to offend or to stumble, verse 3 says, take heed to yourselves if your brother sins against you. Now that's the way Matthew 18, 15 begins, if your brother sins against you. Both passages obviously are Jesus giving instructions about what to do if your brother sins against you.

It's inevitable that they will. It's impossible, but that offenses will come. He said that's unavoidable, but woe to the person through whom they do come.

If your brother does sin against you, does offend you, instead of being stumbled, you should deal with it. Instead of just bearing a grudge, internalizing your anger and your pain over what they did, let's bring it up. Let's bring it to the surface and deal with it.

Now, Jesus says in Luke 17, if your brother sins against you, rebuke him. And if he repents, forgive him. So, you go to your brother initially and say, this is what you've done to me.

This is a sin that you've committed against me. Assuming that the person is a good-hearted, true Christian and desiring to be clear of these matters and wishing for relationships to be in such a way as glorify God, and desiring to have his conscience pure, that person will repent when confronted with a sin. And Jesus said in verse 4 of Luke 17, if he does this seven times even in a day and comes and says, I repent, you should forgive him.

So, that agrees with Matthew 18, 15 up to a point. Because Luke 17 doesn't say what to do if he doesn't repent. Both passages, Matthew 18, 15 and Luke 17, 3, these two passages we're looking at, both of them say what to do if your brother sins against you, you confront him.

And both of them tell you what to do if he repents. Forgive him. But, Luke doesn't say

what to do if he doesn't repent.

That is also a contingency. What if you confront him and he just doesn't agree with you? He doesn't think that what he did was wrong. Or even if he does think it was wrong, he says, well, you know, that's too bad for you.

You know, no court would touch me. You know, I've erased my trail and I'm going to get away with this. Well, if that happens, Matthew 18, 15 goes further.

He said, if your brother sins against you in Matthew 18, 15, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. That's rebuke him. If he hears you, that means if he repents, if he heeds what you're saying and realizes and agrees that he's done the wrong thing, you can iron that out.

You have gained your brother. The assumption is you want reconciliation. That's why you're doing this.

And if he repents, he hears what you have to say and agrees, then you forgive him and everything's great. It's as it was before. Verse 16 says, but if he will not hear you, and at this point he goes beyond what Luke tells us, take with you one or more, one or two more.

That by the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word may be established. Now, this expression that Jesus uses, by the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word may be established, is actually a quote, essentially a quote, from the Old Testament. And it occurs many times in the Old Testament, usually in the context of a court of law.

The Old Testament, Deuteronomy and Leviticus, and I believe Exodus also, I think all three of those Old Testament books in various places, say that a person accused of a crime could not be condemned on the basis of a single witness. Every accusation against a person before a judge would have to be established by at least two witnesses, at least if it was a serious charge. Or else it was considered not to be an established thing.

It was just, you know, something the judge couldn't deal with. If there were no witnesses but the accuser, then no action could be taken. It would take two or more witnesses to establish everything.

Now, in the New Testament, this concept is brought forward five different times. This is one of them. This is, on this occasion, of course, it's actually quoted, and it's in a context similar, where actually a person is being accused, not of a crime before a judge, but of sin before God.

And Jesus basically takes the code of court protocol, basically, from the Old Testament, and says this principle applies also in your interpersonal rifts that aren't handled before a judge, that are just handled among yourselves. He says, if he doesn't agree with you,

now see, if you go to him alone and say, you did such and such, and he agrees, then there's two witnesses, him and you. It's established, and he repents, and you forgive him, and that's the end of it.

But if he refuses to take appropriate action, that is, if he refuses to repent, and in some cases, depending on the nature of the sin against you, he might have to make restitution. If he's really repentant, it would make sense. You know, if he's damaged your property or stolen from you or something, in such a case, then he should make restitution as well.

But if he won't do that, then you take two or three witnesses, or excuse me, one or two, along with yourself, that makes two or three. So you've got two or three witnesses, and you follow the Old Testament principle. Now, notice, you don't go out and blab it to everyone in the church at this point.

In fact, many Christians, once someone has wronged them, they never go to the person. They'll just blab it to everyone else. This happens all the time.

It's cowardly, of course, and, you know, anyone who wasn't a coward would confront the person who sinned against them. You might say, but why is it cowardly? Maybe it's just being generous. Maybe it's just being forgiving.

Maybe, you know, it's just a very nice thing to do, to say nothing to anybody. Well, let me say this. There are times when, in fact, that may be the loving thing to do, to say nothing to anybody.

But all too often, the person who feels like he's being generous by not speaking to the party that injured him is not observing this idea of speaking to nobody. That person often is speaking to other people about it, at least to those closest to him, and those, usually, that he suspects will be sympathetic toward his side of the story, which means he's campaigning, he's building a case against somebody who's not even aware that they're being accused. And sometimes that party never realizes that they're being accused, ever, or if they do, sometimes it's only after a great number of people have heard the story from the other side, far more than the person accused would ever have a chance to go and tell his side of the story until he doesn't even know who all has heard it, how far the rumor has spread.

The idea here is that love desires to see reconciliation. If somebody's sin against you is so inconsequential that you really bear him no grudge, it's easier for you to forgive and forget, and there's nothing more to be said about it, and perhaps it doesn't represent a pattern in that person's behavior, then there's not really any reason to make an issue of it. If you can just say, oh well, no big deal, nobody's perfect, and you forgive the person, and it's not a recurring thing, and you just forget it, it's just not that important to you, then I don't think you need to confront them.

The idea of confrontation here is not to be followed legalistically, but in the spirit of wanting to fix the relationship. If it's not broken, don't fix it. A lot of people have felt that they should go and confess their sins to people who didn't even know that they had sinned against them.

I remember hearing one lady say that she had gone up to another lady in the church and said, you know, when I first met you in the church, I thought you were ostentatious and proud and flirtatious and wore too much make-up and so forth, but now that I've gotten to know you, I think you're an okay person. And this person thought they were confessing their fault, but actually what it was, it made the person who didn't even know that they'd been judged like this, it made them aware of something that really made it hard for them to feel comfortable around the person. There had been no discomfort before.

To follow these relational rules legalistically without any sensitivity about how relationships will be impacted, I think, is not what Jesus intends. What the underlying principle here is, is that if a relationship's broken, fix it. And if somebody has sinned against you, and you're remembering it, and it's an issue to you, and probably more often than not it will be, it's not wrong for that to be an issue to you, in a sense.

And especially if it's a pattern in that person's life, if that person is repeatedly doing similar things to you, then one thing is for sure. Even if you're extremely gracious and generous, and you can absorb all these insults and all these injuries from this person without ever speaking to his soul, without ever feeling bad toward them, yet that person is not going to be someone you're going to be seeking out. They're not going to be a person that you're going to be willing to be close to.

That person is hurting the relationship, even if you're refusing to be offended. And therefore, that person should be confronted for the sake of the relationship. Now, some people say, well, do we really have to be friends with everybody? Can't we just kind of... I mean, the body of Christ is a big place, a lot of people.

Can't we just have our friends over here and have nothing to do with people over here? Yes. Yeah, I mean, obviously you're not going to have contact with everyone in the body of Christ. However, there shouldn't be anyone in the body of Christ that you have unresolved grudges against, or whom you would feel uncomfortable seeing.

If there's anybody that you would feel uncomfortable seeing, then in all likelihood there's something unresolved between you and them. You might not have to see them very often, and it's often the case that people who don't like you or whatever are long gone from your life, and you may have long ago forgiven them, and the likelihood of ever seeing them is not great, and so forth. And I don't think you necessarily have to go looking up all these people.

I don't think you have to make a long list of everybody who's ever sinned against you that you've never confronted, and go look them all up and go through this procedure with them. The idea is, since this person can be brought before the church, the assumption is both parties are in the church. Both parties are in the same church.

Remember in Jesus' day, of course there was no church as we know it now until after his ascension, but after he ascended there was, and throughout the apostolic period, a single church in any given place. It might mean in many congregations, even in a given town there might be many congregations, but they were all part of one church. Therefore, all the parties concerned would be probably in close proximity, would have to deal with each other in an ongoing basis, and would have, in many cases, circles of relationships that overlapped each other, which is really an uncomfortable thing.

If you and another person are not exactly friendly toward each other, not exactly feeling warm about each other, and yet you have some mutual friends, it makes it very awkward. Because when you hang out with your friends who are also friends with that person, then you can't help but wonder, has this person, last time they were with so-and-so, was that person talking about me? Do I have to bring this up? Do I have to vindicate myself with this person? Should I say nothing? Where does this person stand? I know they're still friendly with this person who's not friendly toward me. I'm sensitive to this because there's actually some cases like that quite close to home in my own life and my family.

That is not my immediate family under my roof, but the more extended family. There are people who are not as friendly toward me as I could wish they were. As far as I know, I've been as friendly as I can be toward them.

There are a few people that aren't very friendly to me, but they are friends with people who are also my friends. I don't see, in fact, in one case, the case that's most current in my thinking right now, the parties that are not all that friendly toward us, they live on the other side of the country. They're not even in this state.

They're not even in this part of the world. Yet, we have friends who, on rare occasions, they correspond, they visit, and so forth, and those people. That's fine with me.

I've got no problem with that. But I always wonder, what are they hearing about me from these people who I know to be unrepentant gossips? By the way, I've gone through some of these steps with them. Everything except taking them before the church.

But, you know, I mean, if there's an overlapping circle of relationships between your circle and those of the party that you're not really at peace with, it's bad. And Jesus is assuming a situation where that would be the case. If they didn't have telephones and telegraphs and rapid transportation, if you didn't really rub shoulders with people who didn't live nearby, you never went very far from home.

And so the people you had problems with were people in your neighborhood, people in the same church, or in another congregation in the same town, perhaps. And therefore, the assumption is you could take them before the church, and the church that knows you would also know them, and there'd be a fair hearing from both sides there. But what I'm saying is that if someone's totally out of your life now, and they've sinned against you, and you realize there's something unresolved, if you feel so led to contact them, that's fine, but I don't think that a legalistic following of this is necessary in all those kinds of cases.

The point is, the relationships that are really in your life, how are they? What is their quality? Is there anyone that you don't love? Is there anyone that you're holding something against? Is there anyone that if you saw them you'd feel uncomfortable with them? Or if your best friends were friends with them, you'd feel uncomfortable with them? If so, then there's not the kind of love between you and that party that Jesus would have. And it should be your desire to repair that relationship, and to get it placed where there is such. Now, if you're the offending party, if you're the person who broke the relationship by some misdeed on your part, you are to take the initiative.

You don't have to wait for them to come and confront you. Sure, they should do what Jesus said and come and confront you, and you should repent if you've done something wrong, but if they don't do it, you don't have to wait for them. Jesus said, in Matthew 5, he says, if you come to the altar with your gift to offer to God, and there you remember somebody has something against you, the assumption is you've done something wrong to them, that's why they have something against you.

At least they think you've done something wrong to them. He said, don't even offer your gift there, just leave it at the altar, go to that person, reconcile with them, and then come offer your gift. So, the idea is, if you've wronged somebody else, then there's the place for, if you're aware of that, and they're holding it against you, then you should go and initiate the repair of the relationship, the repairing of the breach.

On the other hand, if you're the injured party, you can do that. If they haven't come to you and repented, then you can go to them. The point is that both sides of this break should take initiative if the other hasn't done so, to try to say, listen, let's not live with this kind of feeling between us, let's work it out.

And so you go to them, but you do so without going to others. You don't make it a public thing first. When Jesus says, go to him between you and him alone, that's an emphatic point in verse 15.

The idea is not just that you communicate with him, but you communicate him in absolute privacy. The implication is you haven't talked to anyone else about it first, and if it gets cleared up at this point, you're not going to talk to anyone else about it ever. If you can regain your brother in absolute secrecy, then it need never be mentioned again.



And, of course, the reason for that is because you're not just trying to make a case and campaign and get people on your side in a conflict and really keep the conflict going, but with you having the upper hand because all the friends are on your side. The idea is that you really want a relationship with that person, you really care about that person, and you want to do unto them as you would hope they do unto you. If you sinned against somebody and were unaware of it, or were in a state of unrepentance about it, you would hope that someone would bring you to repentance, I think, unless you wished to die with unrepentant sin on your conscience.

I don't think anyone who's smart would want to be in that position. You'd want to be informed. You'd want to be brought to repentance.

And that's why you do it. On the other hand, though, you would want it to be done as privately as possible because you would want to be given a chance to repent in a private conversation rather than make it a public spectacle before you've even had a chance to know that you've done something wrong. And so you make it totally private so that if he repents in that situation, you've preserved his privacy.

Now, if it doesn't work in a total secret meeting or a private meeting like that, then you take one or maybe two others, just enough to establish something. In the mouth of two or three witnesses, everything will be established. You still keep it as private as possible, but not so individualized and personal that it looks like just a grudge between you and him.

You've got witnesses that agree with you that he did the wrong thing. And, you know, he should receive that. Unless, of course, he realizes that you've just brought your best friends, people who don't like him anyway.

It's not always the case that witnesses are objective. There's a lot of times the witnesses that you might bring are people that you've already filled their ear with your side of the story. And they come with prejudged positions on the thing.

And therefore, they're deaf to his arguments, they're deaf to his defenses. You know, they come already primed and conditioned by what you've told them. And they're there to say yes to everything you say, but that doesn't really prove that you're right.

Because anyone can make a case in the absence of the other party and get people on his side. And once people have made a decision, it's very often hard to move them from that position if it's strongly held. The best thing to do would be to get the most objective witnesses you can find.

People who are not particularly going to be on your side or his side, but someone who can look at the matter and say, well, it's quite obvious that this is the party that did the wrong thing here, that first violated the relationship. Look at 1 Corinthians. You may

know where we're going here.

1 Corinthians chapter 6. In 1 Corinthians 6, 1, Paul says, Dare any of you having a matter against another, that is, if your brothers sinned against you, dare you go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints? Then he says down in verse 5, I say this to your shame, is it so, that there's not a wise man among you, not even one who is able to judge between his brother? Now, the point here is that you should be able to find some wise, objective Christian who's not particularly already predisposed to be on your side or on the other party's side, but somebody who maybe isn't even a close friend of either, or maybe equally close to both, but that that person should be brought in as a witness, or to such people as witnesses, all the better. That way they can hear the case from you, and hear the other party's side, the one who's accused. Hopefully, they'll hear your case for the first time when you go to that party.

Now, that's not always possible, especially if you've been gossiping about the other party. They may have heard your side already. But if you've minded your Ps and Qs, and you've kept your mouth shut as you should until the proper forum, then you can simply say to, you can approach somebody who's an older brother or a wise brother, or respected by both parties, and say, listen, there's a little matter between me and another party.

I've talked to them privately, and it's not resolved. Would you mind, you and you, mind coming, and just kind of sitting in, and I'm going to talk to this person again, but I need some witnesses. I need a couple of witnesses to this, to help make a judgment on it.

So, you and the other two parties go. The other two parties, ideally, don't even know what the subject's going to be. They've not been preconditioned to see your side or anything like that.

They don't even know what the argument is about. Jesus doesn't say all that, but I'm saying objectivity is of value here. Because anyone can get a bunch of his friends to come in a gang, and gang up on the guy that you're upset with.

And all your friends will say, yeah, we agree with him. But if the guy rejects their word, in a sense, it's not really much different than rejecting you privately, because those people are just echoes of you. But if you get objective witnesses in there, and say, now, here's what happened.

This guy did this to me. And I did this back, or whatever. Here's what's gone on so far.

What do you guys think should be done? Now, if, in fact, you're the injured party, and the other party has sinned, then the judges, those who are witnesses, I should say, would be able to say, well, it's quite obvious that you were wronged, and this party should make such and such restitution, or should apologize, or something, you know. Now, that's one

way that I understand the taking of two or three witnesses. Another way would be to understand it between two or three witnesses who actually saw the person's sin, along with you.

You're not the only one who knows about this sin, but they were present when it happened. They saw it, and therefore they can testify to it as well. Either one of those kinds of witnesses, either persons who saw the thing happen and have already felt that there was a wrong done, and are just waiting to be called in as witnesses on the matter, because they are eyewitnesses of it.

That could be one way of moving into the second step of reconciliation. Or else, like I said, people who are totally impartial, people who don't favor your cause more than the other, but just who can sit there and are wise enough to make judgments in such matters. In any case, if this is done right, then the party who is being confronted will have to deal with the fact that not only you think that he's done the wrong thing and ought to repent, but these other parties too.

Either they saw the same thing and agree that it was sin, or else they're hearing about it for the first time, and just hearing about it, they objectively say, well, yeah, that's right, this guy does have a case, you did him wrong. And the idea is that the witnesses also speak up, because it says, how he says it there in verse 17, if he refuses to hear them, the witnesses actually make a judgment call on the deal, not you. You've already made your judgment call when you talked to him privately, he knows what you think.

Now the witnesses come in, and they make their judgment call, and if he won't hear them, then you've got a person who's giving some possible signs of being obstinate and uncorrectable, and not particularly interested in doing the right thing. Now see, if you go to a person and say, listen, you ripped me off, and he says, wait a minute, I don't think I did rip you off. We made this agreement, if you recall, I think you said this and that, and there's some confusion about what went on, the other party may not repent, because they don't agree with you that they've sinned against you.

That's where witnesses coming in would help, because the witnesses actually might turn on you. If they're objective, they might actually agree with the guy you're accusing, and say, you know, you're being a little touchy about this thing, and he really didn't do anything wrong to you, and I think you ought to drop this thing. Or they might say to the guy, now you, yeah, this guy's right, he does have a complaint, and I think you need to work this out, and you need to do the right thing by him.

Now, presumably, most people who are true Christians, and one of the signs of being a true Christian is the desire to do the right thing, the thing pleasing to God. Most people, in the face of two or more objective witnesses, would say, well, I guess maybe I did do something wrong here, I guess I should repent. And therefore, it is quite possible to resolve the matter at this level, even if it was not resolved at the first level, and you've

still kept it as private as possible.

If you win your brother at that point, excellent, that's what you're trying to do. You're not just trying to condemn him, you're trying to win him. If you win him over and he repents, then nothing need be said anywhere else about the whole situation.

But if he won't hear them, take it to the church. Now, when Jesus uttered this, of course there wasn't anything like a church established. And for that reason, you know, liberal scholars who are always trying to find excuses not to believe what Jesus said to be authentic, they say, well, this is, you know, Jesus didn't even have an idea of the church.

I mean, they make Jesus out to be someone who never planned to start a church. But Jesus twice mentions the church in his teaching. But you see, both passages are considered to be non-authentic by those who are liberals, because they figure, well, Jesus didn't have this concept of starting a church.

That's sort of a thing the disciples came up with, an institutionalization of the movement that Jesus started. But actually Jesus had already said back in chapter 16 to Peter, upon this rock I'll build my church. And if that is an authentic saying, and to me there's no reason to doubt it, because he is speaking future.

I will build my church. He's not suggesting he has one already, but he's going to have one. He's going to build one.

Having mentioned it a few chapters earlier, it should not fall on perplexed ears when he mentions the church again here. He's already said he's going to build a church. And now he says you can take these kinds of matters to the church.

Let the church make the judgment. Now, it's not at all clear whether this means that you take them up on the platform in front of the whole congregation and say, okay, we're going to take a vote. How many of you think this guy's wrong? It might be that that would be the way to do it.

I suspect that can be divisive in the church, however, because anyone who votes against the guy will then be divided in opinion about those who voted in his favor. I don't think a democratic process is necessarily the best thing, although ideally if everyone in the church was hearing the Holy Spirit correctly, which has never been the case in any church I've ever been, but if everyone was really being led by the Holy Spirit, then you'd have a unanimous voice saying, we the church agree this person is wrong. But short of people having infallible guidance, and every individual in the church having infallible guidance, to actually take the guy before the whole congregation visibly and say, okay, what do you church think about this, would require something like a vote.

And that would be very disastrous, because when you realize that the outcome of the vote is whether the guy's treated like a pagan or whether he's allowed to be in the

church. If he won't hear the church's decision, he's out, see. And he's like a pagan or a tax payer, that means he's not considered to be a brother.

This is a decision about this guy's fate, his soul. And so, I mean, there may be many in the church who would agree with the witnesses on your side and say, yes, you have a case, this guy is wrong, he should repent. But if there was a vote and even a few people, or a minority of people, thought he was innocent, they might feel very strongly that the church had been too harsh in kicking out a guy that they don't think was guilty.

Now, I'm not just speaking hypothetically. I've been in situations before where it wasn't so much a matter of taking a vote among the church, but where discipline problems, which had been handled at the lower levels, were actually taken to the church. In most cases, it was taken by the elders, because you go through these lower steps, and then the elders would bring the case, having found the person obstinate and unrepentant, would just go to the church and say, this person has been talked to about such and so, and they give the case and they say, we'd like to ask you to not consider this person as a member of this church.

There's other places in the scripture that talk about disfellowshipping and marking someone and avoiding them. Sometimes we call that disfellowshipping. I think the Catholic Church called it excommunication, because they were out of communication, out of communion.

Ex is the Greek particle that means out of. So excommunication being out of communion, out of fellowship. So, the trouble is, of course, in churches where the elders have not had the complete respect of the congregation, even times when the eldership has gotten upset, we are disciplining this person by putting him out of the church, please have nothing to do with him.

There's always been a few people in church who thought, ah, shucks, the church is being too mean, and who'd go privately and encourage the person and say, yeah, we think you've got a raw deal, the church is really wrong. In the early church, I don't think that was possible. In the early church, as I read it, it seems like the elders and the apostles made decisions, and you couldn't just start another church.

You couldn't overthrow the elders and the apostles. You just went along with them or else you left the church yourself. And most real Christians would never do that.

They recognize the authority of the apostles and the elders. And so I think take it before the church probably meant you don't take a vote among the congregation, but you go to the elders, you go to those who are in charge of the church, see if they agree with the two or three witnesses and the charge that had always been made. If the eldership as a whole says, yeah, this is a clear cut, then presumably the elders or someone in leadership would take it before the church, take the case and explain what has gone on

and inform people that this person has been treated like a tax collector or a heathen man.

Now, taking it before the church, of course, can ruin a person's reputation. Nowadays, there's such an attitude against judgmentalism and things like that that to ruin a person's reputation publicly, to make public statements about a person's sins, even in the context of a church meeting, can almost bring lawsuits. It has brought lawsuits against churches before.

It's very hard to carry this out in the exact way Jesus said without incurring lawsuits against the church, claiming that you've slandered the person. See, most people think that their private sins and their private lives are none of anyone else's business. We don't have this sense of community in the modern world, in the modern western world that used to be a factor in all societies.

All societies used to have a sense of community. Everyone was kind of related to each other. Not necessarily biologically related, but everyone kind of bore the burdens of their neighbors.

If there was a problem, they'd... Well, the old-fashioned barn raisings are a good example. If someone's barn burns down, all the neighbors from far and wide come with their hammers and they raise a new barn for the guy. I mean, it was all for one and one for all.

That's not at all the case nowadays. And in the old days, if the community said, hey, your behavior's been unacceptable, and they ostracized you, that was a serious problem. And it was considered that the community has the right to do that.

After all, your behavior affects the whole community. But since there's hardly any sense of community left, either in the church or in the world, in the modern world, it almost seems outrageous to the thinking of some that anyone would concern themselves with their individual sins. I mean, why should I have to answer to anybody about my sins? How dare the pastor of the church say, I can't go to church when I'm living in adultery or cheating on my income tax or whatever? I mean, that's just the mentality of the modern age.

And unfortunately, it's made it, in some cases, very expensive to churches to actually take these words and carry them out. Of course, it can be done discreetly or in some other way. And Jesus didn't exactly give detailed instructions about how it is brought before the church.

The point seems to be that if the person is obstinate enough that he doesn't believe two or three objective witnesses about the thing, then, of course, the last resort is for the church to address it. And presumably, the elders of the church or whoever is leading the

church would be the ones who would specifically address it. And if he won't hear what they have to say about it, then there's really no reason to consider that person a Christian.

And he should be treated a certain way. And obviously, the congregation should be informed in some manner that this person needs to be treated in this way. Now, the carrying out of these instructions... Oh, by the way, I need to say this before I make my next point.

Even treating him like a heathen or a tax collector doesn't mean that you're not interested in reconciliation. It is not a punishment, but a discipline. There are two things that this procedure can serve to do.

Well, more than that, probably. One is it can expose somebody who's not a real Christian, which is a good thing for the real Christians to know who is and who ain't. I mean, anyone can claim to be a Christian.

But a real Christian wants, at least, to live a holy life. They may not live a holy life perfectly, but they want to. And when you confront them with their defects, rather than defending their defective behavior, they will want to clear it up by repenting.

I mean, a true Christian will want to repent when he's found to be in sin. A person who doesn't want to repent is... It's questionable whether that person can be called a Christian in the biblical sense of the word. Therefore, it kind of separates between the wheat and the chaff in this way.

If a person lives in unrepentant sin and is confronted mercifully by parties at several different levels and doesn't repent, that person kind of exhibits that they probably are not a true Christian. Now, Jesus didn't say he is a heathen, but he says you have to treat him as if he's a heathen. Because you don't know, only God knows, whether that person might be a weak brother or someone who's going to have to be under the discipline of the Church and of God for a while, an erring son, a prodigal son of God, or whether they're a fake Christian.

Only God knows that. But since we don't know their heart, we have to judge by behavior. If given every opportunity at several levels of confidentiality to repent and they refuse to take that opportunity, how can you judge them to be a Christian? You have to assume probably they're not, and you don't welcome them in the fellowship anymore.

Now, let me just give you some corresponding scriptures elsewhere, just so you won't think that this is a strange doctrine pulled out of some obscure text. There's a great deal on the subject in the scriptures. If you look over at Romans chapter 16, verse 17 and 18.

Romans 16, verses 17 and 18. Paul says, Now I urge you, brethren, to note those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the teaching which you have learned. Divisions

would be probably over theological errors and offenses would be sins against parties.

Note people who do that and they're not obeying the doctrine of the teaching of Christ which you've learned. And avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, though they may claim to, they don't, but their own belly and by smooth words and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the simple.

So, there's a couple of reasons here for avoiding certain people. If they don't abide by the teachings of Christ, either in theology or in ethics or in behavior, it's not so much that you're finding them to be a bad Christian, you're finding them to be not a Christian at all. These persons aren't serving the Lord Jesus Christ.

I said anyone can claim to be, but it's just this kind of confrontations and their result that determine whether someone really is or isn't serving the Lord. And so they expose themselves for what they are and there's another reason for separating from them, he says, because these people are slick. They have smooth words and flattering tongues and they deceive the hearts of the simple.

And there's a lot of simple hearts in the church. Believe me, there's many undiscerning people in every church I've ever been in. In fact, I'd have to say lack of discernment is probably one of the preeminent defects of modern Christians.

Is that they just don't discern between truth and error, right and wrong, you know, true and false. And therefore, those simple people have to be protected. The church has to put slick con artists and false brethren out of the church so that they don't have continued access to these simple-minded people who they can win over to their side and to their behavior with smooth and flattering words.

That's what Paul's saying. You've got to protect the sheep. Okay, it also serves another purpose.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 5, talks about the need to put somebody out of the church because of immoral conduct, apparently unrepented of. And, of course, the man in question in 1 Corinthians 5 is a man who is living in an incestuous relationship with his father's wife. And, basically, he says turn him over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, which is another way of saying put him out of the church.

And he says in verse 9, I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people, yet I certainly did not mean that sexually immoral people of this world or with the covetous or extortioners or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, anyone who calls himself a Christian, trying to be in the church, who is a fornicator or a covetous or an idolater or a reviler or a drunkard or an extortioner, or even to eat with such a person. Now, this is obviously excommunication.



Don't eat with such a person. One of the things the church always did when they came together was eat. In fact, Paul talks about the way they were doing that wrong later on in 1 Corinthians.

When they came together, they were not eating the Lord's Supper. They were being carnal. But the point is don't eat with such a person.

Don't welcome that person.