

My Brother's Keeper, Part 4

Luke 17:3-4

Well, we're in Luke 17:3, Jesus addresses two situations here: in verse 3, one in which you witness a brother sinning, verse 3; and another situation where he kind of turns up the heat a bit in verse 4, in which you're not just witnessing someone sinning; you are the victim of that sin. That sin is now against you; you're the victim of your brother's sin. The first isn't personal, necessarily, but the second definitely is.

So when it comes to Jesus' command here in Luke 17:3, "If your brother sins," if he misses the mark, if he strays off course, we're dealing with those sins that are externally observable. We don't address what we suspect may be going on in the heart. We deal only with what we can see or hear, sins that are obvious to us because we can see them with our eyes, we can hear them with our ears.

We like to say when confronting sin, make sure you're dealing with something obvious, something you can take a picture of, something you record on video, don't record each other on video. That's not what I'm saying. But something, you could do that or recorded, you know, audio. Perhaps something dramatic, blatantly obvious.

Could be a doctrinal error, something you hear somebody saying that's not doctrinally right or righteous. Paul instructs Timothy to deal with that kind of doctrinal error in 1 Timothy 1:3, Titus in Titus 1:11. Could be a behavioral issue or a doctrinal issue, and when it comes to threaten the unity of the church and create division in the church, Paul tells Titus to deal with it swiftly and decisively in Titus 3:10. The divisive man after the first and second warning, if he doesn't heed it, kick him out. I mean, speeding through the steps of church discipline. You don't give this guy a pass because the unity of the church is so precious. These little ones are so precious.

In some cases of sin, it's not so dramatic as maybe a fist fight, adultery, cheating on taxes. In some cases of sin, especially relational sins, or sins of speech and attitude,

sometimes it takes time to discern a pattern of a speech or a pattern of behavior that could be a habit that needs to come to an end. It's been destructive. It's been disruptive.

So obviously in a church environment, especially gossip and slander, sins of the tongue can be the most obvious. Talking about others in a sinful way, complaining about how we've been offended by so-and-so or mistreated by so-and-so, and oh, could you pray for me because of look at all those bad things that they've done, so we couch it in spiritual language and cover over our gossip and slander.

Could be a subtle insinuation of doubt, maybe injecting a hint of suspicion about someone's motives. Subtle or not so subtle character assassination. Well, yeah, that guy, he likes to get up and talk a lot. I mean, you know, he's really, look what he's after, you know? He wants everybody to look at him, you know.

Could be a pattern of complaining, grumbling, irritation, ingratitude. Sometimes these things aren't obvious in just a

moment. Sometimes you hear something and you're like, eh, that didn't sound quite right. But you know what? You don't run and attack it like a bulldog or something. You just, you let that go. You wait and see. Is this a pattern, or is that just a bad day, it's just a off moment.

Gracious with people, but it's still, if we see patterns and habits of sin, for the good of that person, do we want to leave it? For the good of the church, do we just want to let it go? What did Jesus say? "Pay careful attention to yourselves." Are we going to be obedient to that or not?

There are some things you can't pick up in a single conversation, so let's not be hasty. Takes time to recognize a brother or sister might be enslaved to a certain habit of speech, habit of thinking, habit of reacting. Takes time to pray for them. Takes time to grow in loving concern for this person as you maybe search the Scripture on their behalf so you can help them out. So be patient. Don't be negligent, but be patient as you prepare yourself to practice biblical confrontation.

When Jesus says here, "If your brother sins," we've started with a reasonable assumption. We've witnessed a verifiable violation of God's Word. So what to do about it? What action is required? We engage, in biblical confrontation. Engage in biblical confrontation.

What does this look like? Jesus is so simple. He's so simple in how he says this. He says, "If your brother sins, rebuke him." Rebuke him. That's practicing biblical confrontation. Rebuke him. The right thing to do in obedience to the Lord. The loving thing to do in helping a sinning brother. Rebuke him.

The verb here is pretty strong. It's *epitimao*. It's to, you could say, to speak urgently to someone and demand immediate compliance. So you're urgent in speaking with them. Your tone and your tenor of your address is, is urgent. The appeal is serious. And you want immediate compliance. If it's a sin, right? Rebuke it, correct it.

Synonyms for rebuke here, you can use the word, reprove strictly, warn severely, admonish strongly. Those are the ideas here, there's no sense of hinting here, there's no, no beating around the bush, no pampering, no mollycoddling. There is a straightforward dealing with the truth, dealing with the sin. There's no time for subtlety here, using the third person, making some oblique references, talking about a friend of a friend of a friend who had this bad habit, and isn't that bad? You see the point? You see the point? You're kind of like that.

That's not how we do it. You get right to the point. Jesus commands us to be direct, candid, forthright, straightforward. Why? Because this is for their good. Do you want your doctor, when he spots cancer in your body, you say, Hey, so what's the diagnosis, Doc? He's like, Well, you know, I know this one guy in another country. He's got a cousin. And man, you know, just some cancer riddling his body. Well, have a nice day. You walk out of the office, and you're like, What was that? Do I have cancer?

You want your doctor to be straightforward. You want your brother coming to you about a sin issue in your life to be

straightforward. Gentle, sure, but straightforward. If you're concerned about coming across as harsh, listen, that's not a bad thing. That's a good thing. It's good to be concerned about kindness. But you can be frank and forthright, and at the same time be gentle.

In fact, you must be gentle. As a fruit of the Spirit, you must be gentle with people, and kind and patient. I've found you can be gentle as, but many today coming out of the culture we live in are so thin-skinned. Can't take really much of anything. Tissue paper for skin and break so easily. Just being confronted, just being told you might have put a foot wrong, that's enough for them to be like, whoa, what happened? I just got cancelled. It's enough for them to accuse you of being harsh and unloving and all the rest. Don't be harsh and unloving, be gentle.

But listen, you've got to realize that these days we're going to have to muscle up a little bit. We come out of a very weak, thin-skinned culture. It's going to take some time. On the other side of this, I think there are some who see themselves as really good at confrontation, but they really are bad at it.

They lack perspective. They're unable to see themselves clearly, unable to read other people well, and after making a big, foul mess, they walk away saying, What? What? Wow, was she ever sensitive! No, you were just a jerk. You lack gentleness. You act, lack patience. You lack tact. You lack wisdom.

In fact, there's a whole community online that's seemingly reacting against the feminism and the weakening of this culture, and so they've muscled up, trying to be overly manly, taking all the things that maybe feminists have complained about, and toxic masculinity, and they made that their badge. And they say, If you can't handle how direct and straightforward and confrontational I am, it's because you're not manly. It's because you've been affected by the feminism of the culture.

So, man, there are ditches to fall on either side in this whole issue of confrontation. Listen, you want a clear picture of true manliness, of true confrontation, doing it gently but straightforwardly? Look at Jesus Christ. He wasn't a caricature of all the chest-beating, scotch-drinking, cigar-smoking versions of manliness that are false in our culture.



But neither was he a sissy. He was as straightforward and direct as they come, and yet kind with his enemies, loving in his confrontation. He's who we need to be like. And when we practice this, and when we practice it by the fruit of the Spirit, with the fruit of the Spirit we grow. And it's the life of Christ that works in and through us, and he does the confronting through us. That's the goal.

Listen, it's those who know confrontation is hard, it's those who know that it's fraught with difficulty, who are wary of giving unneeded offense. It's those who feel maybe somewhat intimidated by the prospect of having to confront, but who, in obedience to the Lord and out of love for a sinning brother or sister, they willingly embrace the loving duty to confront. Those are the ones we, we see grow and learn in confrontation. They become models of it. They become exemplary. They learn to do it well.

So beloved, don't feel intimidated. Wherever you are on the spectrum, don't feel intimidated by this call to confront. It's

a learned skill, which is why we call this the practice of biblical confrontation. It's a skill that highlights the presence or the absence in our life of the fruit of the Spirit.

Biblical confrontation is going to expose, it's going to reveal our level of Christian maturity, which is a good thing for us, isn't it? Whatever level we're at, biblical confrontation is going to help us grow in Christian maturity. It's going to bring all that stuff to the surface. It's going to show us what we need to deal with, and we're so thankful to deal with it.

When we learn to conduct ourselves according to the fruit of the spirit, Galatians 5:22, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control," that's the life of Christ flowing through us. That's how he practiced biblical confrontation in step with the Spirit. That's what he wants for us, too.

When you see what Christ says in this text, no matter how you feel about it, no matter what you have estimated your skill

or maturity in being able to conduct yourself righteously in biblical confrontation, listen, he doesn't leave us any way to opt out of this. If you are among his disciples, this applies to you. You must rebuke your brother or your sister.

Why? Because Jesus loves this person, because Jesus died to save this person, and because Jesus is calling you to be his, his vessel to sanctify this person. Straightforward rebuke is how he wants you to do it. Leaves no room for confusion. It puts the issue out there in, identifies the offense, calls for confession of sin. He wants, Jesus wants this person to get to the point. He wants the sinner to get the message so that he can repent, and so we can remove the offending obstacle of sin from our midst and get back on track with the joy of obedience.

So it's a professing Christian, one who's missed the mark regarding God's commandments, and when that happens, you rebuke him. Now rebuke can go in one of two directions, right? It can either go well or poorly. Jesus mentions one outcome here in our text. It says, "If he repents," so it's gone well. If he repents, if that happens, which is the best outcome, if he sees and admits his error, he sees how he's missed the mark, he turns

from sin to righteousness, praise God, we're back on track. Full speed ahead.

So if he repents, what do you do? Forgive him immediately. No longer count that sin against him. No longer keep it on the list. No longer consider the offenses on his account. No longer hold it over his head. You don't bring it up, you don't remind him of it. You forgive the wrong, you pardon the sin, you set him loose, and you do it right away, you do it eagerly. That's what we hope for.

If the sin you're rebuking him for involves another person, you might have to, you know, maybe it's against another person, or he offended someone else, well, you might have to help that penitent brother confess his sin to that other person, seek forgiveness from the one he offended, receive forgiveness from the one he offended. Maybe you, your help is needed in that, maybe not.

But you're tenderhearted toward the penitent brother or sister. You're eager to forgive, eager to forgive. You long to

see this person restored and strengthened and back on track and heading in the right direction, marching lockstep with you toward Christ in the Spirit. We're to be one another's biggest cheerleaders in dealing with sin and repenting of sin.

There's another direction this confrontation can go, though, right? What if he doesn't repent? What if he ignores you? What if he defends himself? What if he says, Oh, you, you think you're righteous? There's this counter-accusation coming your way. Blame shifts. Well, you know, I wouldn't have sinned if it weren't for you and that leadership of the church. I mean, I mean, you create an environment where people can't help but sin. What if she calls you critical-spirited, legalistic, Pharisaical? What if the person says, Listen, this is none of your business?

What do you do if something like that happens? Well, sometimes practicing biblical confrontation means we're in for a longer ride. And if we're in for a longer ride, you know what? The Lord is in that as well. The Lord will be with us along the way. And he actually prescribed and instructed for exactly that scenario.

Turn back to Matthew chapter 18. Matthew 18. I just want to give you a footnote here at this point. Whether, whether the outcome is good or bad, we're not concerned about outcomes. We leave that to the Lord. We rejoice in a good outcome, and we kind of buckle up for a bad outcome, but we leave the outcome to the Lord. We just need to be faithful. We just need to do what we're told.

So no matter the outcome, listen, if you've been obedient to Christ in rebuking a sinning brother or sinning sister, listen, you can rejoice that you have been a really good friend of this person no matter how it turns out. If you do what Jesus says with an erring Christian, no matter how she responds, you've been a tool of sanctification. You've been there to help her grow in her holiness.

She may not recognize that in the moment, but you have been a gift of Christ to this person. You have been an offering of Christ of edification, to point the way out of sin, out of weakness, and into a place of strength and holiness. This is

just a footnote. No matter how, what the outcome is, rejoice if you've been obedient. Rejoice.

So in Matthew 18:15, as we read from ESV, it says, "If your brother sins," you notice, where it says, "against you, go and tell him his fault." The King James Version and the CSB put it the same way. They add this preposition "against you." But that's actually not how the Greek text reads. The words there, against you, have been erroneously added to the later manuscripts, but the earliest manuscripts, the best manuscripts, don't include those words, against you. Several translations, the NAS, the NIV, the LSB, the Legacy Standard Bible, they leave them out, and that's accurate.

So Matthew 18:15, it actually says, "If your brother sins," period. "If your brother sins, go and tell him his fault." That's exactly parallel to Luke 17:3. "If your brother sins, rebuke him." So Jesus says, "If your brother sins, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you," that's the same thing in Luke 17:3, "if he repents." Listening to you, repenting, same thing. "If he listens to you," in that case, good news. It's hugs, smiles, pats on the back. Why is

that? Because "you've gained your brother," it says. You've won him over to righteousness. Back on track. So far, so good.

In formal church discipline, this is called Step 1. Step 1 is a private conversation, a one-on-one conversation between the offender and the one who's confronting. Now, this isn't justifying obviously some judgmental, you know, like we said, a judgmental kind of a jerk who goes off half-cocked, and he confronts every little thing in a person's life.

This is something that calls for restraint among us and caution, careful prayer, prayerful attention to detail, and prayerful reflection. It's like the immune system in the body, making it healthy. In a healthy church this Step 1, conversations between people, should be happening quite often, regularly, sin being resolved in private, with no one but God and the two brothers or the two sisters knowing about it.

But what if he doesn't repent? What now? Jesus says in verse 16, if he doesn't listen, if he doesn't repent, what do you do? "Take one or two others along with you so that every



charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses." If repentance is not forthcoming, Step 2 is necessary to establish the charge.

The circle widens out a little bit, still stays private, but two or three other chris, they enter into the situation so they can examine the case and establish this matter together. Maybe they decide together that the confronting person has been too zealous. Maybe he's made a mistake in judgment. So if he's been inaccurate or incorrect in making this charge, then the two or three other Christians will provide some objective clarity. They'll overturn the charge, they'll correct the overzealous brother or sister, and that's a win, too, as well, right?

However, if the two or three others establish the charge, if the charge of sin has been correct, and the rebuke is warranted, then the added weight of their consensus, that's an encouragement of several other Christians who agree, and it'll help this sinning brother to see his error. We simply want him to see his error correctly, see his sin come right, see him come to repentance. That's what we're after.

Again, if he repents here, praise God, you've won your brother. That's what we're after, and that's where it ends, right there. But if there's still no repentance, then it's time to get a higher authority involved. And Jesus brings that in in verse 17. "If he refuses to listen" to this small group, "tell it to the church."

This is called Step 3. Jesus wants his church to convene, to gather together so his will can be made known through the church in this matter. Obviously, here at this stage, Step 3, the church's elders have had to come, get involved because no matter is going to come before the gathered church without elder oversight, without elder approval. And the elders have to hear the situation, review the facts of the case, adjudicate the matter biblically, maybe have some follow-up conversations and see what's, what's been going on, and then either give their approval or disapproval, but approval to bring this matter before the church.

If they decide that, look, I think the two or three of you have gathered together, and I think you've kind of, here's where we think you could be corrected in this, and let's give this, this brother or this sister more time or be patient with this. They instruct, they oversee, they're to be the mature people in the church.

But if they give their approval, if they've adjudicated in the same way as the two or three, they bring it before the church and the corporate involvement of the church, the agreement of the local church, the weight of the church's collective witness. The hope is that this sinning brother or sister will relent, that he'll humble himself, that he'll repent of his sins, that he'll feel the weight, that he'll be restored in humility and fellowship, and he'll stay in step with his church. It's what we long to see.

However, not everything goes that way. Jesus says in Matthew 18:17, "If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." That's the final step, Step 4, having to excommunicate the unrepentant

sinner from the church based on his sinful behavior, based on his refusal to repent.

By the way, that contradicts his insistence that he is a genuine believer. Remember, we started with the assumption that this is a true believer, but when he is stubbornly acting contrary to that, the church gathers, declares its judgment that this man appears to be an unbeliever. The church makes a declaration. This professing Christian who repents, refuses to repent is no Christian at all.

The church has loved this man all the way. The church has loved this man from start to finish. The church loved him by warmly embracing him and encouraging and teaching him all through his life in the church. The church loved him by rebuking him for his sin, its members, first one, then two or three others, and then the elders getting involved, and then the church collective.

Now the church continues in its love for the man by refusing to accept a false profession of faith. That's love. If

he goes on in a false profession of faith, what happens when he stands before the Lord at the end? End of Matthew, chapter 7, "Many will come to me on that day and say, 'Lord, Lord, did we not do good works in your name and cast out demons and do many miracles? You are our Lord,' and Jesus will say, what, 'depart from me. I never knew you, you worker of iniquity.'"

It is a loving thing for us to make this kind of a judgment when we have to, and excommunicate somebody, refusing to accept their profession of faith, refusing to accept their identity as a believer by saying amongst ourselves, no, we as a church say that this person is not a believer.

You say, that doesn't sound very nice. Listen, it's kindness itself to do the hard thing. The man is self-deceived. This person is in grave danger of the woe that Jesus mentions in Luke 17:1, that he described in Luke 16:19-31. This is kindness itself to treat this, this man or this woman like a Gentile and a tax collector. It's love that motivates us to reach out and then evangelize him. We don't write them off and let them go. We want to evangelize him and see him come to faith.