

IF YOUR BROTHER SINS AGAINST YOU...

By David H. Roper

The following teaching by Pastor David H. Roper was given at a *Body Life* service at Peninsula Bible Church on March 23, 1975 to accomplish discipline in line with the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 18. In all the years that PBC has been in existence, this kind of action has occurred only twice. It is our hope that making this teaching available to the body-at-large will help others to see how our church handled a very difficult problem. We also hope that this example will not be taken out of context or used inappropriately. We trust our readers to consider the truth presented here. The comments and questions at the end were from members of the congregation. All answers were by David Roper. One final note: It is impossible to convey the amount of prayer, discussion and careful thought that preceded this action over a period of two years. The Board of Elders of PBC, together with others in the body, spent many hours in prayer leading up to the action described.

Believe me, there are about a hundred things I would rather do tonight than what I have to do now. As you know, the New Testament gives us very clear directives about the way we are to treat brothers and sisters in Christ who act contrary to scripture.

In Matthew 18, the Lord gives us some instruction concerning the specific approach we are to take with a brother or sister who is violating clearly stated commands in scripture. This does not concern violation of conscience, but rather a violation of principles or commands in scripture that are clearly stated and about which there is no question. When a brother or sister is living contrary to the truth there are certain things that are to be done and they must be done in a spirit of love.

Jesus said in Matthew 18:

“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.” (Matthew 18:15-17)

These are weighty words. Jesus said that if we see a brother or sister overtaken in a fault, participating in some sin, we are not to gossip behind their backs, nor are we to turn our backs on them. We are not to reject them; we are not to ostracize them; nor are we to overlook their sin. First, we are to go to them in private and point out to them the specific area of disobedience.

Paul gives us a further note on this practice in Galatians 6. He says that we are to go in a spirit of meekness, considering ourselves lest we also be tempted, recognizing that we are all prone to fall into sin. At one time I may be the brother you have to approach, and another time you may be the brother or sister I have to approach. It works both ways. None of us has the right merely to sit in judgment on another brother without being willing to have that brother come to us in love and point out some area of sin in our life.

And yet if we see a brother who is sinning, we are to go to them and between the two of us, we are to sit down and look at what the scriptures have to say on that issue, and to do so in a loving and gentle spirit. Then, if he refuses to hear the truth, we are to take two or more to speak with him about the matter. This is not a pressure tactic to try to force him to respond. Rather, we need to show him that this is not a personal vendetta on the part of one individual but something that affects *the entire body*. In the same spirit of love and gentleness, approach and talk with him.

Jesus said that if he still won't respond, if he won't repent and forsake that sin, we are then to tell it to the church; not, however, in a condemning way.

The purpose of this action is constructive and redemptive. The hope is that other members of the body who know that individual will go to him and appeal to him to return to the Lord, and that all will pray for that brother. Then, Jesus said, if he still will not respond, we are to treat him as a tax collector and a sinner. That has often been taken as justification for making an outcast out of a sinning brother—throwing him out of the church, ostracizing him or excommunicating him. But that's not what Jesus meant. If you know anything of the heart of our Lord, you know how he treated tax collectors and sinners. He loved them and ministered to them, but he treated them as those outside the family, outside the people of God. Jesus' point is that if a person who calls himself a Christian can resist the kind of loving treatment he outlines here, this gentle handling over a long period of time, then he must not, in fact, be a Christian. Anyone who has Christ in his heart cannot hold out against that kind of approach. So, if our brother rejects the truth after his sin has been announced to the church, then he is to be treated as an unbeliever.

In 1 and 2 Corinthians, we have a New Testament illustration of this procedure in practice. In 1 Corinthians, we learn that there was a brother in Corinth who was guilty of flagrant sin (1 Corinthians 5:1, 2), and he was corrected in the way Jesus had described it should be done. Then, in 2 Corinthians, we have an added note that indicates that the brother repented and came back to the Lord and to the body (2 Corinthians 2:5-8). Paul says that since that happened, this brother is to be received warmly and welcomed back into fellowship because, as Paul says, "...we are not ignorant of [Satan's] designs" (2 Corinthians 2:11). His point is that Satan can cause us to have a critical, unforgiving spirit and reject that brother because of some sin he has committed, and refusing to receive him back would bring about a split in the church. That was exactly what was happening in Corinth among the believers. Satan was dividing the church through a critical, carping, unloving, resentful spirit among the body there.

The thing that I want to underscore in all of this is that this action is redemptive; it's constructive. This is no ultimate condemnation; it's designed to bring a brother back. By and large, the church has forsaken this practice because we're afraid of it. But it is clearly spelled out in scripture, and we cannot avoid it.

Therefore, in line with these instructions, and with deep regret, we announce that a brother, and friend, among us has, for some months now, been engaging in homosexual acts with young men. We're certain of this, there is no question—the evidence is overwhelming. He has been approached first on numerous occasions by one, and then by two or three or more. He has been appealed to to repent and forsake his sin. In certain situations where he could not deny the facts he has admitted that he has done these things and he has named them as sin—he knows he is guilty of wrongdoing—but he later justifies his acts and is unwilling to forsake them. Therefore, for his sake and for the sake of those young men over whom he has influence, we feel we must tell it to the church. We do this with a great deal of personal sorrow, and this is certainly not a precipitous action. We've weighed and pondered this decision for a number of months. He has been appealed to many times, and much prayer and thought and effort has been put into securing his repentance, but since he doesn't seem disposed to respond, we feel we can wait no longer.

I want to say again that we are not doing this in a vindictive way. All of us recognize our own weakness and any of us could fall into even graver sin, given the right circumstances. We recognize our own need for repentance and forgiveness and, but for God's grace, we would all be in a similar situation. So, far from reflecting a judgmental attitude, this is an attempt again to reach out to him in love and have him return to fellowship with this body. This man is a good friend of mine and of many of you here in the congregation, and this is exceedingly difficult for me. I am sure that some of you have come to Christ because of his influence in the past. We appeal to you as his friends and members of the body of Christ to pray for him, and if you know him, to correspond with him and to appeal to him to forsake this sin and return to the Lord. We believe that the Lord will grant to him forgiveness, and may grant to him a more fruitful ministry in years to come.

(The following is a condensation of the question and answer period, during which time several people volunteered questions and comments.)

Question: How do we decide that certain sins are to be brought to the attention of the church while others are not?

Answer: This is an excellent question, because as a matter of fact there are sins that from the point of view of scripture appear to result in far greater damage than the sin of which this person is guilty. David, for instance, was much more severely disciplined for his pride on the occasion when he numbered Israel and took pride in the size of his army than for his sins of adultery and murder. Whenever a brother is guilty of gossip or a divisive spirit, or bears resentment against his parents or some other person and he persists in that sin and refuses to respond, the same procedure ought to be followed. And we've done that. We don't always do it consistently and that's to our shame, but we have tried to follow up on these things. There are many of you here, individual believers, who have talked at various times with different brothers, and their response was to repent. When that happens the matter is ended. Jesus says in the very next paragraph after this section in Matthew 18 that if your brother sins against you and he repents, you must forgive him 490 times. It does not need to go any farther. If he repents then it's all over and the relationship is restored. Ninety-nine percent of the time it never goes any farther than that, but in those cases where it does, regardless of the type of sin, it ought to be handled in this way. We're not singling out sexual sin as particularly heinous. All sin is damaging, and thus abhorrent.

Question: Is it necessary to make public the name of the brother whose sin you are announcing to the church?

Answer: Yes. Scripture is very specific about these things. Paul wrote the whole epistle of Philippians to the church in Philippi because of two ladies who were causing problems in the church. They couldn't get along; they had been appealed to many times, but they kept on fighting and getting everybody upset. In that letter, he lays down an awful lot of theology before he gets to the personal issue—it's all about the unity of the body and how to preserve that unity through a spirit of humility and willingness to give up one's rights. In order to understand the impact of this you have to realize that these letters were read in public, as they only had the one scroll. Then, as the reader came to the end of the letter, with the entire congregation listening attentively, he read, "I entreat Eu-o'dia and I entreat Syn'tyche to agree in the Lord" (Philippians 4:2). He named them. If we didn't name the person, there would be a great deal of speculation, since we all know people who are struggling with various sins. It's necessary to name him, also, so you can go to that brother and continue to appeal to him. If you don't know who he is, you can't do that.

As to the young men who were involved with this person, scripture says clearly that what they are doing is wrong and destructive, and in most cases they know that and they have turned away from it. In fact, this is how we know some of the circumstances. These men have come to us and have admitted wrongdoing and have asked for help, and scripture looks at them as it looks at anyone else who sins and turns away from it—they are forgiven. The blood of Jesus Christ covers and cleanses us from all sin—*all sin*, not just certain kinds of sin.

Question: Was this person informed that this announcement would be made?

Answer: He was informed and correspondence was sent, so he was fully aware of our intent. He was told, also, that we would retract instantly if he would come and talk to us and would be willing to turn away before the announcement was made. This announcement was made simultaneously at another church which was directly involved, and we kept the lines open so that we could phone them immediately if we were contacted by this person.

Question: How much of a factor is that person's position of influence as a teacher in deciding at what point one goes to the whole body?

Answer: Scripture says that a leader is to be rebuked before *all* because his influence is so widespread (1 Timothy 5:20), and that did have bearing on our decision. It is true that leaders have far greater responsibility and great

culpability. That's a heavy one for all of us. That's why we read in James: "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1).

Comment: I've had contact with this person over the last three or four months, probably more than most here, and I've been a friend of his for ten years. He led my wife to the Lord, and we've traveled all over the country ministering together. There's no human being that I love more, and yet I've told him personally that the evidence was overwhelming and that this move was necessary. When you really see what sin does to the mind of somebody you love, the tragic effects it has and the crumbling into weakness, it's very hard to bear. The key thing here is, as Paul says, when something comes to the light it becomes light (Ephesians 5:13). When our will has hardened in response to the Spirit of God, we need additional light—opportunity, if you like—to respond to God. And I think that this is the final act of another level of hope, another level where he can experience all of your prayers and your correspondence and the evidence that your life is at stake with his life. This is what God wants to come out of it, and he does want this person restored. As one who loves him very dearly, I was foremost in voting that we should do this, and I hope it will bring the right results.

Comment: I think as an act of love, since this is a *Body* ministry, we ought to be very careful what we say to the world outside regarding this matter. I don't think it would be edifying to this person for us to go back to our school and job situations and say, "Hey, guess what we did Sunday night in church?" This is a *Body* ministry; judgment begins in the household of God. This is a concern of Christians—we don't want to set this person up to be mocked by the world. That's not the function. So I think this is something we ought to confine to the body of Christ. I think all of us when we pray for this person tonight ought to make ourselves available to God to be used in this man's life.

Question: How do we ensure that legalism doesn't creep into our body—that's death, too. I can't see how we balance, how we can be sure that we're not witch-hunting.

Answer: I think the thing that will keep our action positive is the motivation behind it. Why do we do it? Our concern is love. Our concern is not to get this person or anyone else to measure up to some arbitrary standards that we set forth. We know that violation of God's law will ultimately destroy a man—for the wages of sin is death—and our concern is for this person and his soul and his life. As long as we continue to operate in that way, out of love and out of concern for the man, then I think we can guard against legalism.

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