

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Pentecost 16 – August 28th and 31st, 2008

Matthew 18:15-20

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony 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, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. “Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

Dear Christian Friends:

Dr. Terry Bennett of Rochester, New Hampshire was treating an overweight patient. He told her, “Your obesity is bad for your health. You need to get on a program. Join a group and peel off the weight or it is going to kill you.” This woman didn’t like what she heard. She filed a complaint with the state medical board. The attorney general launched an investigation. Now, Dr. Bennett will likely face disciplinary action. When you hear a story like that you have to say, “That’s ridiculous. A doctor is supposed to warn you about dangers to your health. What is the world coming to when a doctor can’t even do his job and speak the truth to his patients?”

Well, at the danger of having some of you launch a lawsuit against me, I am going to be like Dr. Terry Bennett. I’m going to tell you the truth. “You are a sinner and so am I. Sin destroys your faith and your salvation and it destroys my faith and salvation. So we need to repent of our sins. Get rid of your sins before they kill you forever in hell. Get rid of your sins in the blood of Jesus and you will enjoy God’s gift of eternal life in heaven.” Of course, proclaiming that message is not just the pastor’s job. In our text Jesus shows us that this job belongs to the whole Christian Church on earth. God’s Word tells us:

Sermon Theme: Admonish One Who Has Sinned!

- 1. Why admonish?**
- 2. How should I approach them?**
- 3. What should I say?**

Now when it comes to sin and grace, the question is not, “Do Christians sin?” The question is, “What do you do when a fellow believer sins against you or is living in sin that is hurting his relationship with their God?” Jesus gives us the answer. **“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along... If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”** Jesus tells us that Christians sin against each other. A friend at church gossips about you. A relative steals your money when you do business together. Husbands and wives argue. Children disobey their parents. Classmates cheat. Couples live together before marriage. Sin is everywhere. The cure for sin is not gossip. The cure is not giving the sinner the cold shoulder. The cure is not fighting back and getting even. The cure for sin is grace. The cure for sin is God’s undeserved forgiveness. We need to emphasize grace because it is in our nature to think, “Hey, that person sinned against me. He hurt my feelings. She damaged my reputation. They made my life miserable. I’m the one that needs love and comfort. I’m the one that needs help.”

Well, that's partly true. However, Jesus tells us, **"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."** When someone sins against we have a responsibility. It is our duty to share God's grace, God's love and God's forgiveness with them. It is our duty to win the sinner back to repentance and faith. Of course, that means confronting the sinner. It means telling them, "You have broken God's law. Yes, your sin hurt me. But you hurt your faith even more. You are killing your relationship with Jesus as long as you do not Repent. So repent. Confess your sin. Call on Jesus to forgive you. Jesus loves you. Jesus died to pay for all your sins. So believe in Christ and rejoice in his forgiveness." And did you notice how this is to begin, **"Go and show him his fault, just between the two of you."**

Let's have a show of hands. How many of you enjoy confrontation? No hands. That's what I was expecting to see. Most people do not like to confront others. This is especially true in modern American society, where the accepted rule is "mind your own business and I'll mind mine." And, actually, that's what I was hoping to see. People who enjoy confrontation should be disqualified from doing so. They will never do it in the right spirit or with the proper goal in mind. Nevertheless, somewhere along the line it may become necessary to talk to others about their sin. Although we should be willing to overlook minor offenses, there are some problems that will only grow worse if they are not dealt with properly in a straightforward way as Jesus urges us to do in our text. But what we need to remember is the attitude with which we confront our brother or sister in the faith.

Maybe we can look at things in this way. Leading a Christian to see their sin and to repent is like soldiers rescuing their buddies from a prisoner of war camp. During war soldiers often times will try to capture enemy prison camps to set their fellow soldiers or countrymen free. When they do set them free, they don't yell at the former prisoners and say, "You fool! How could be such a bad soldier and let the enemy capture you?" No, soldiers rejoice together because their buddies are free from enemy control. That's the attitude we need when we speak the truth about sin and grace to our fellow believers who sin against us. Satan, sin and unbelief are the enemies. We're on the same side as the believer who sins against us. So we call sinners to repentance with patience, with humility and with the goal of winning your brother back from the prison camp of sin and impenitence.

But now comes the long list of excuses on why you can't do this. Some avoid this very important confrontation by saying, "Who am I to tell someone else what to do? I certainly don't have my life perfectly in order." While it is true that we have no right to force our personal opinions on other people, however, we do have a responsibility to encourage fellow believers to be faithful to God's truth, contained in Scripture. Thus, if you believe that the Bible contains authoritative instruction from God, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16), and if you have a genuine love for God and your neighbor, you will not shirk your responsibility to confront that brother in appropriate ways to help him remain steadfast in the faith.

Another way to avoid this very important confrontation is to say, "Isn't it God's job to show people where they are wrong?" It is true that God is the only one who can convict people of sin and change their hearts, which He does through the power of the Holy Spirit working through His means of grace. But God generally uses another person to bring that saving Word to us. He often uses another person to speak the Word of Law that a sinner needs to hear to see the need to repent. What better person to do that, than a Christian brother who loves us and wants the best for us? We need to know that we cannot change people's hearts on our own, but through loving confrontation we can be used by God to help people see where they have a problem with sin and to see their need for a Savior. That's when they are ready to hear the Good News: Jesus has already confronted our greatest enemies for us. He won the victory over sin, death, and the devil that He might win us over as His brothers and co-heirs.

When you win your sinning brother over to repentance and forgiveness, you are doing the work of heaven on earth. Jesus says, **"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. "Again, I tell you that if two of you on**

earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” When we call sinners to repent of their sins, God is speaking through us. Likewise, when we forgive a repentant sinner, God is working through us. So for a sinner to ignore their pastor or a fellow Christian is the same thing as ignoring God himself. That’s because God works through his Church on earth.

But that does not mean we are free to do whatever we want. It does mean we can choose to forgive or not forgive someone based on our human ideas. We can’t say, “The Church isn’t going to forgive your sins. It doesn’t matter how sorry you are. You didn’t give enough offerings last year, so we all decided to withhold forgiveness from you.” No, that’s not what Jesus meant when he said, **“If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.”** You see, that word, ‘agree’ is a Greek word from which get our English word, ‘symphony.’ Now, for a symphony to do what it is supposed to do, all the musicians must agree. They must all play their parts at the right time. They must all follow the same musical score. They must all follow the same conductor. Well, when it comes to speaking for Jesus, the Church on earth must agree with our heavenly conductor, Jesus Christ. We must also agree with his heavenly sheet music, the Holy Scriptures. When the church agrees with Jesus, then the joys and glories of heaven overflow on earth. That is the reason the Church exists on earth. We gather in the name of Jesus so that through our preaching and through our sacraments Jesus himself gives his forgiveness and salvation to sinners.

That is the most important thing for us to ask for from our heavenly Father. Yes, we certainly ask God to give us food, clothing and a comfortable home. We ask God to give us good health, a loving family and a stable economy. Certainly, we pray for people who are suffering health problems or experiencing great loss. And we certainly gather to pray for people who are suffering tragedy. Yes, we agree to ask God for a lot of good things. However, the best thing we ask for—the most important thing we ask for is forgiveness of sins—both for ourselves and those who sin against us or are living in sin. Thankfully, God loves to answer that prayer. To souls burdened by their sins—to souls sorrowing over their sins, God will always give them the comfort of forgiveness and the joy of salvation. This does not happen because we do such a good job of asking for it. No, God forgives us because Jesus did such a good job being our Savior. And in his wisdom, God chooses to deliver that wonderful news of forgiveness through you and through me. May we always have the desire to use God’s Law to open sinful hearts to see their sin and then pour in the Gospel to heal that sin-broken heart. What a joy it is to see God’s powerful saving Word change hearts to trust and believe in Jesus as their one and only Savior. Amen.