

The Bible Banner

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“He Didn’t Go to Him First”

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Our Lord told his disciples, “*And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. "And 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-gatherer"* (Matt. 18:15-18).

While the context of this passage limits application of it to settling individual problems involving sin, some extend this to every possible situation where differences occur. One who does his duty in teaching and preaching truth is, at times, required to “reprove, rebuke, and exhort with all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). The scriptures require faithful Christians to “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them” (Eph. 5:11).

Not infrequently, when a brother publicly rebukes a purveyor of error, a question pops into the minds of too many, “Did he go to that person before he publicly dealt with him and his error?” As the late brother R.L. Whiteside once wrote, “There is an unnecessary amount of ignorance regarding this matter of discipline. It is astounding that some will argue that Matt. 18:15-17 is a model for all manner of discipline whereas the Lord was there telling how to settle personal differences.” (*Reflections*, page 283).

Have you ever noticed that those who “rebuke” someone who publicly “rebukes” another for not first going to the person “rebuked,” don’t go to the one they “rebuke” for not going first to the one publicly “rebuked?” Can you understand that sentence? Figure it out -

- a person who says, “He didn’t go to him first,” seldom goes to the person they think is wrong for taking a rebuke public. Normally the one who publicly exposes and rebukes sinful actions hears of the criticism via the infamous “grape vine.” Consistency, thou art a jewel! It reminds me of the person who wrote and published a tract against “uninspired literature.”

There is no connection between Matthew 18 and the responsibility to reprove and rebuke publicly those who publicly promote error. The procedure outlined by Jesus in Matt. 18:15-18 has nothing to do with public debate or public confrontation over doctrinal issues. It has nothing to do with rebuking an individual or a group that practices public error.

The issue in Matthew 18 is only about settling personal differences where one sinned against another. Jesus directed his instruction only to the person actually sinned against. The matter was private and personal. Neither the one or two witnesses mentioned in verse 16, nor the church need necessarily be involved. The church is factored into the settlement only as a last resort.

The sin was a verifiable sin -- not a difference in judgment or understanding. It was not something done by one that the other brother took exception to and simply didn’t agree with. The sin was **against** a brother. Just as sin separates a person from God, it separates brothers when the offender is truly guilty of sin. Let it be clearly noted that in cases requiring a public rebuke of a false teacher, the sin is against the Lord. One who comes forth to defend the Lord is not the one against whom a sin has been committed in this case. It is not personal. Why apply something that is personal and private to a public obligation to rebuke error?

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Paul related his personal history from conversion to a confrontation he had with Peter in Antioch (Gal. 1:15 - 2:15). Paul's conversion and conviction were based on what the Lord revealed through him, not a college of apostles. He described the situation at Antioch, when Peter arrived, as not only Peter, but also others, whom he said were walking "not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel."

Paul obviously felt no need to follow the procedure of Matthew 18. He didn't regard Peter's inconsistency as a personal affront or sin against himself. He rebuked Peter to his face for a sin against the Lord. Paul knew that Peter "stood condemned" (Gal. 1:12). It was not a sin against Paul personally.

Seeing the sinful influence Peter's dissimulation had on others he publicly rebuked the whole lot of them -- "When I saw that *they* walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Cephas *before them all* . . ." No, Paul didn't go privately to anyone, or thereafter take the required one or two more. His first action was the third step of Matthew 18 -- he told it to the church then and there.

Verse 11 says he resisted Peter to his face the moment he realized Peter "stood condemned." There is nothing at all to indicate Paul did this privately between just the two of them. The text says he "*said unto Peter before them all.*" Nor is there any evidence that he followed step two of Matthew 18, taking one or two more with him privately to Peter. If so, where is the implication? He simply took the issue public and told it to the church without going through the first two steps outlined in Matthew 18.

Matthew 18 deals with how to correctly handle a private sin between two brothers in Christ. It isn't even a matter where there is a

disagreement between two brothers. Paul had a sharp difference with Barnabas, but did not look on that as a personal sin for which Barnabas had to repent (Acts 15:39). In the Lord's teaching there was sin clearly involved, a sin that was real and provable. Though not specified, the sin in the passage was not known far and wide. The way the Lord directed the one sinned against to handle it shows it was no more than a personal matter. His procedure is designed to bring about repentance and reconciliation.

The passage is directed only to the one sinned against. All things being equal, the Lord's way of handling this kind of thing would keep it private. Neither the others to be taken by the offended one nor the church need be involved. As a matter of fact, there is nothing specific said about what the either the witnesses or the church are to do, other than listen. It is personal to the end of the procedure. When all efforts at reconciliation prove fruitless, the injunction is still personal -- "Let him be unto **thee** (singular) as the Gentile and the Publican" (Verse 17). Brother Whiteside summed up the matter very well by the following thoughts:

"If those who think that passage furnishes a model for all cases had been present when Peter dealt with Ananias and Sapphira, they would have felt that Peter should have pled with them over a period of days before acting.

"Ananias and Sapphira had not trespassed against a brother, nor were they stirring up a faction. They lied to God, and that lie was premeditated. It was not due to any sudden emotions but was the result of a carefully laid plan between the two. They were rotten at heart, and were cut down immediately. Some mushyheads of today would have said that Peter should have exhorted them and

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prayed with them, but Peter was guided by the Holy Spirit. Ananias and Sapphira had selfish ends to gain, and they lied about what they were doing. A man who deliberately lays plans in the church for his own advantage, and then lies about it, imitates Ananias and Sapphira! But Peter did not deal with Simon (Acts 8: 14-24) as he did with these two; the case was entirely different.”

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Those who teach and practice things with no sanction and approval from the Lord are in the same category as Ananias and Sapphira; they lie to and often about God. They need to be rebuked, not because someone has been personally sinned against but because the church cannot tolerate false teaching and practice and please God. And after all, that is what this is all about -- pleasing God.

So, the next time you hear a person criticized for publicly rebuking a person for teaching and/or practicing error, don't even be concerned whether the "rebuker" went to the sinner privately first -- be thankful he has the spiritual fortitude and ability to recognize "unruly men, vain talkers and deceivers." Thank the Lord he is strong enough in the faith to shut their mouths. Stand behind and support good men who have a deep concern for the purity of the Lord's teaching and his church to prevent the overthrow of "whole houses" by "teaching things they ought not" (Titus 1:11).

Thank the Lord for those who follow the apostolic admonition to "rebuke them sharply" (verse 13). The way to support good men who sharply rebuke those in error is to esteem them "exceedingly highly in love for their work's sake" (1 Thess. 5:13). The "rebuker" pleases the Lord; the "rebuker" of the "rebuker" doesn't.