

KEEP CLEARING IT UP

What do you do if somebody important to you sins against you? The questions behind that question are: How do you live in the church? How do you stay a part of God's Kingdom? We are a part of one Body, in some mystical way, for we partake of one loaf, but we are also splintered endlessly because we cannot figure out how to live by the precepts of this Scripture passage.

"If your brother sins against you" I assume the intention is broader than male sibling – that it is someone important to you, more than an acquaintance. It also implies "equal" or peer; someone in authority over you does not apply.

If your brother sins against you, what do you do? Standard procedure is to go around to all your other friends and tell them the whole story, slanted from your point of view, and see how many people you can get on your side before the offending brother realizes what you are doing. By that time, you are embroiled in a reeking mess, and reconciliation is twenty times more difficult.

The first thing you *should* do when sinned against, or when you *think* you are sinned against, is go to the person alone. The first response – the one with the best chance – is for you two to work it out together before anybody else knows, before embarrassment or pride escalates. That is the best hope for regaining the brother.

If that does not work – if there is no headway, no softening on either side – then what? Do you call in the police; threaten to sue; resign from the committee; stop coming to church; get bitter and criticize most everything you can think of every chance you get? I have tried most of these ways at one time or another, and some of you have too. Go back to the principles Jesus teaches us.

The mandate of the message is: Keep clearing it up. Keep getting the miscommunication and the misunderstanding taken care of. Get it healed, forgiven, forgotten, or something, but keep clearing it up! It kills not just the individuals but the community too if we do not keep clearing it up. Remember Matthew 5:23-24? *"If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."*

If the two of you are stymied, Jesus says bring in two or three others. Two or three less-involved peers listening to both sides can frequently find a way to unstop the blocks. The goal is not just to decide a dispute, but that the two quarreling “brothers” will start hearing each other again and be able to open the channels between them again.

But sometimes one or the other feels that the witnesses are biased. And sometimes they may well be. In those cases, you call the whole church together, each of the disputers puts the case before the church, and the church decides what it thinks is fair. Everything has to stop somewhere. This time both parties are expected to abide by the church’s decision – the church being the whole community of friends around these two individuals – and the church is only a “church” insofar as it tries to discern and be obedient to the guidance of God.

What if one party is unwilling to abide by this final decision? “Let two stout monks in the name of God explain the matter to him.” Lost sheep are one thing; contentious wolves are another. Jesus is compassionate – not soft. If a person does not believe in the importance or authority of the community, he or she is not a part of that community.

Then Jesus moves the matter to another level. He makes it clear that when it comes to the church, “*Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*” I have searched and searched for alternate meanings, but to no avail. It seems terribly clear that Jesus is promising that our stumbling and inadequate attempts to be His church here in this world will nevertheless be honored in heaven. And any time two or more people set out to form a Christian community – to become a faithful band of followers – their efforts shall be known and confirmed in the realms to come.

So now I have to go back and redefine “brother” a little. It is a peer – a covenant-bound person – who is engaged with me in some effort to be the church here on earth. It is not just someone important to me, but someone important who is also part of my faith family.

The practical impact is the importance of the church to my life, if I am serious about following Jesus. That is, I must be part of some church, I must live under the authority of that faith community, and I must take that so seriously that I expect my behavior and progress within the church to be a reflection of my status in heaven.

This passage teaches us that we cannot make it without a church (a community of faith which we live in and are part of), that we must live under the authority of that church (or move to a faith community we will be obedient under), and that our future destiny depends on the learning and growing we do within the context of some church here on earth. If this community becomes primarily a political or economic enterprise, then living under its authority is almost certainly doomed to power plays and a competitive spirit that does not seek the truth above greed or self-interest. But if the community remains a fellowship of friends who seek spiritual awakening, then living under that authority has some chance of discovering order without losing compassion.

The truth is, we need order and structure under which we freely choose to be accountable. Sometimes our own opinions are too narrow, and we know that. We need community – a people to whom we belong and for whom we care and strive as much as we do for ourselves. We cannot make it alone. The universe is too vast, and life too large, for us to find our way into truth and life and love all alone, even in eighty or ninety short years. So we also need allegiance and love for God as revealed by Jesus.

Now, what is it that so frequently stops our spiritual progress and delays, corrupts, or sidetracks the spiritual pilgrimage? *“If your brother sins against you ...”* That’s right: the relationships within the spiritual fellowship that mean so much – that bless us and affirm, inspire, and encourage us. Therefore, we are all the more upset when they turn difficult. They do that from time to time, and they shall go on doing that. It is part of the meaning of being the church. You don’t think the Holy Spirit would be foolish enough to let us into heaven without some trials and experiences of getting along together, do you?

“If your brother sins against you” – somebody you care about, somebody you thought you could or should be able to trust, somebody inside the spiritual fellowship – then that is a trial indeed. Jesus knows this, and so He tries to instruct us, if we can hear it.

Now comes Jesus’ illustration: A man owes the equivalent of, say, five hundred thousand dollars. He is not rich. We are not told what went wrong, but we can imagine how it would feel. How long does it take a normal wage-earner to save five hundred thousand dollars? If you can imagine it at all, it is a life-long task. It means that every spare dollar for as long as you live goes to pay off the debt. The feeling is: “What’s the use?” Even if you pay it off, there is no time

or life left. It's the way some of us feel about the national debt, only this is more personal, gnawing at you every morning, sapping your strength through the day, staring bleakly at you each evening.

The lender calls for the debt to be paid. Apparently it's overdue. The man's equity, whatever it is, will be turned over to the lender (king or whatever), and the man will become his slave until it is deemed that he has worked off the debt, which in this case is clearly for the rest of his life. Furthermore, his wife and children will also be slaves until the debt is worked off.

You think *you* have problems? Do you sometimes feel like a failure? How would you like to come home to the wife some night and say, "By the way, honey, I have a bit of bad news for you ..."

So the man is called in and this is his fate as far as he knows. To have such a thing happen is so appalling that, despite its uselessness, he falls to his knees and implores his new master to give him more time. "Please do not thus destroy my family, bring my wife to such shame, undo any chance for my children to have decent lives of their own. Surely I can make more money for you each year if you leave me free than if you enslave all of us!"

The lord, in this story, does not do what the man asks – not anywhere close. "*Out of pity for him,*" the story says, "*he released him and forgave him the debt.*" How much does he now owe? Nothing! Two moments ago, his life and the lives of his whole family were ruined and enslaved, utterly and without recourse. The highest hope he could think of was to be allowed to work out the rest of his life to pay off his debt as a free man, without destroying his family along with him. That was the biggest ray of hope he could imagine, and even that was far-fetched. Now, not only is he free, but his whole life is back in his own hands. He owes nothing! The richest of us here cannot imagine how wealthy he felt, just to owe nothing.

Only, this is a very sad story, probably the saddest story Jesus ever told. This man is so frightened, so sick with fear and shame and worry, that he never hears what the lord has said. He only hears what he himself has asked for: more time to pay off the debt. The concept of being forgiven cannot break through to him. It is too enormous. It is beyond his imagining. He has been hopeless and helpless against his fate for so long that his brainwaves cannot comprehend it. He is forgiven. He owes nothing. But he cannot believe it. In his heart, he still lives under the weight of the impossible debt.

And so when a friend later comes by who owes him a hundred bucks, he grabs him by the collar and says, “Jake, you gotta give me the hundred you owe me. I have to have it. I’m desperate. You gotta give it to me today.”

You see, he is obviously still terrified – gotta get the hundred, gotta get every dime he can scrape together – because in his mind he still owes the five hundred thousand and it’s going to be collected any day. His terror still rules him. Can you possibly understand?

So the forgiveness is repealed and the man ends up in worse shape than if he had been enslaved. He is turned over to the torturers. The story runs out of words to describe his pitiable condition. There is no forgiveness for those who cannot receive, give, or believe in forgiveness. Even though they are free, they live as if they were in prison, under torture.

The illustration reminds us that when we are sinned against or when one who feels wronged comes to us to get it straightened out, we should remember first the bonds of the friendship itself. If that does not help us, we should go to the friends we have in common and try to gain perspective through the interlinking friendships. And if that does not help, we must remember that as followers of Jesus Christ, we live under the discipline and vows of the church, and so we turn to the whole church.

If that does not help, we must remember that we live under God, to whom we owe all of life and everything we have or ever shall have. And we think of a Cross, where we have each been forgiven far more than five hundred thousand dollars. And we think of the ways in which we are loved and accepted – without any way on earth or in heaven of our ever deserving it or earning it or paying it back. And then we can proceed to our choices and responses and attitudes.

Each time even a glimmer of it comes clear again, we are ready to take communion and rejoin the Christian church. For as long as we are the church, the mandate remains: Keep clearing it up.