

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I'm sure you've all heard of the term "tough love." I don't know when the term first came into use, but you hear it a lot these days. What is tough love? Well, if you're talking about children, it's that love you show by disciplining that child, yes, even spanking on occasion. You discipline the child even though you know he or she won't like it at the time, because you know that what they are doing is wrong, harmful or dangerous. By correcting that behavior now, you are doing something for the life-long benefit of your child, right? So showing “tough love” means helping someone in a way they might not like at the time, but is ultimately to help them.

The Lord Jesus teaches us today to show “tough love” to our fellow believers who do wrong. You see, when a brother or sister in Christ sins, they contradicted God, they have put their souls in danger. They have done something that is very harmful to themselves and others. You see, sin that is not repented of, is like a splinter that you don't pull out. You've had that happen, right? You get a splinter and it hurts. Usually not a lot. In fact, you may be tempted to leave that splinter in, because removing it is more painful than just leaving it alone. But if you don't remove it, it will fester. It will be infected. It can lead to much bigger problems. So also sin, if left unchecked in a person's life, it will fester and it will break one's relationship with God.

Love for God and love for a person's soul means we will help them. In our Scripture reading today, the Lord Jesus directs us to show tough love to fellow believers when they sin. Jesus shows us how we are to do this. He also explains why.

Our text instructs us, *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you."* Note that it says **brother**. Jesus isn't talking about our ministry to unbelievers here. He's just talking about fellow Christians who have gone astray. And Jesus says we should go, **"when he sins."** Jesus isn't giving us a license to ridicule and confront fellow believers for mannerisms and habits we may find irritating. Nor do we have God's encouragement for correcting people who do things differently than we would. We are only to correct and confront our fellow-believers when they do things differently than *God* would have them do them.

When they have sinned against God and are not admitting their guilt, God says we should *"go and show him his fault, just between the two of you."* There's one little word we tend to overlook here. The word **"go."** It's easy to understand. It's easy to say. It's really hard to do. Our sinful nature does one of two things. One thing is to **be quiet and ignore** the sin our brother or sister in Christ commits. "I don't want to get involved," you think. "Who am I to judge? God will take care of this." But Jesus doesn't tell us to ignore a person's sin. It's too dangerous for that person's soul for us simply to ignore it.

Our other tendency is to **gossip**. Instead of talking to the one who sinned, we instead talk to everyone else instead. God doesn't say, "If your brother sins, talk *about* him." He says, "talk *to* him!" When we start gossiping about the sins of others, you quickly see that instead of winning the sinner back, the sinner is instead avoided by the members of the congregation, looked down

upon, avoided. This is *not* what our Savior wants! He wants the person to repent, be forgiven and be restored.

Another temptation is to talk to the person, but not in right way. We must not act judgmental or have a "better-than-thou" attitude. Let's face it... our sinful nature likes to be right, doesn't it? Our sinful nature takes a secret pleasure when someone else has unquestionably done wrong. And the more clear cut the case is that they did wrong, the more we will struggle to approach them in with humility and love, instead of with pride and smugness.

Yet we aren't to avoid confrontation. Jesus says plainly, "Show him his fault." *Confront the person as quickly as possible, decisively, directly... with love, dignity and respect.*

The Old Testament gives us an excellent illustration of how to confront the sinner. Remember the story of David and Bathsheba. David had committed adultery and got Bathsheba pregnant. Then to cover it up, he arranged to have Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, killed in the front lines of battle. Once that happened, he figured he was clear to marry Bathsheba and no one would find out about this whole thing. Well, God loved David too much to let him hide his sin. He told the prophet Nathan to go and talk to David. Or, in the words of our N.T. text, "Go and show him his fault." That is exactly the same thing God tells us. When your brother sins, go and show him his fault. Nathan showed David his fault in a creative way. He told a story about how there was a rich man who had hundreds of sheep. His neighbor was a very poor man who had only one sheep, his pet sheep which he fed and took care of almost like a child. When a visitor came to stay with the rich man, instead of butchering one of his own sheep, he decided to grab the poor man's sheep and butcher it for his guest. Well, most of you are familiar with David's reaction. He was steaming mad! He said, "*As surely as the Lord lives, that man deserves to die!*" To which Nathan said, "*You are the man.*" Nathan had done a brilliant job of showing David his fault. Just as the rich man took the only, dearly loved sheep of the poor man, David had taken the dearly loved wife of a faithful soldier, even though he had hundreds of women he could have chosen instead. And Nathan's rebuke worked! David listened to Nathan. Nathan had won David over. David humbly admitted, "I have sinned against the Lord." Hearing his confession, Nathan comforted and reassured David saying, "The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die."

What an excellent illustration of verse 15 of our text. When we know a brother has sinned, we are to go to him, and show him his fault. If he listens, as David did, we are to forgive him his sins, that is, comfort him with the good news that God has forgiven his sins through Jesus.

But what if that doesn't work? What if the person refuses to listen to us and denies his sin? Jesus tells the next step involved. He says to take with you one or two others to talk with the person. What advantage does that have? Well, sometimes a person is willing to listen to someone else if not to you alone. Sometimes two people just don't see eye to eye, and the one who has sinned may not be willing to listen in such a case. Hopefully if one or two other people come along, then he will be willing to listen. **It adds weight to your witness.** It tells the sinner that this isn't just a matter which you consider a sin, but other people do as well. The other reason for bringing a couple other people, is that if the person still refuses to repent, you have the **testimony of two or three people** that this person is indeed unrepentant. If the person at this point realizes his sin, and confesses he has sinned, then praise the Lord and announce the forgiveness of sins to his troubled soul! After all, that is exactly what we are striving for. But what if he still won't listen?

At this point, Jesus says it's time to make the offense public. It's time to take the matter to the church. Why the church? God has made his church the highest earthly authority over such matters. The hope is that when the sinner sees that the whole church is in agreement that he has sinned, he will realize the severity of his sin and repent. However, if that is not the case, and the sinner remains hardened and defiant in his sin and refuses to listen to the church, Jesus says, *"treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."* In essence, Jesus is saying that excommunication is in order.

Many people have a misconception about what excommunication is. It's not kicking someone out of the church. Rather it is a public acknowledgement that this person is no longer a brother, as proven by his impenitence. Some people read Jesus' words and think that this means the person should not only be cast out from the church, but should be scorned, ridiculed and basically trampled into the dirt. Yet that's not Jesus' intention. Remember how Jesus treated pagans and tax collectors. He ate with them! He ministered to them! He realized that these people especially need to recognize their sinfulness, repent and believe and Jesus. So also the excommunicated member is excommunicated out of love -- to show him that unrepented sin is the same as denying the need for a Savior. If you deny a sin needs forgiving, why do you need a Savior to forgive it? The purpose, then, of the excommunication is to once again encourage repentance and confession of sin to bring the straying brother or sister back into the fold.

Friends, if you need encouragement to go and win back your brother or sister in Christ, just remember the forgiveness you have in Christ. You know, God could have looked at **our** sins, and just *condemned us* to death instead of telling us about them. But thanks be to God that he valued and loved **us** enough to confront us with our sinfulness. God directly confronts us with our sin, doesn't he? He's not vague. He doesn't beat around the bush. He never excuses it. He calls sin a sin. And in the same way he is very direct with us about the *consequences of sin*. Passages like, *"Your iniquities have separated you from your God (Is 59:2)."* and *"The wages of sin is **death** (Rom 6:23)."* Yes, God makes sure we know full well our sinfulness. He crushes us under the guilt of our sins until we cry out like King David did, *"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin."* And our all-loving God does just that! He cleanses us with Jesus blood. He forgives all our sins. Just when we fully realize we are utterly corrupt and incapable of pleasing God, he declares us (not by our merits) to be just in his sight because Jesus paid the eternal consequences for our sins when he died on Calvary's cross. In his sight, it's just as if we'd never sinned. He welcomes us back as lost children and embraces us in his love and mercy.

How did David respond when the heavy burden of sin and guilt was lifted from him? He said, *"I will teach transgressor your ways, and sinners will turn back to you."* David was compelled to do the very thing Jesus commands us to do in Matthew 18! Namely, to show tough love by confronting sinners so they will turn back to God. When we realize the blessed forgiveness God has given us, we too will be compelled to reach out with tough love to straying brothers and sisters, so they will know the comfort, peace and forgiveness we have through Christ.

The last three verses of the text then give us a comforting promise. They tell us that Jesus will be with us every step of the way. As we go as he has commanded us, we go in his name. He

promises, *"Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* If someone refuses to listen to us, and Christ's church pronounces to him that he is not forgiven and his sins are bound to him, that declaration is in perfect harmony with the heavenly judgment. It's just as if Christ had declared it himself. And if this person repents of his sin, and the church "looses" his sins from him and forgives him, Jesus says that too is what happens in heaven, as if he had done it himself. Christ has given great authority to his body, his church.

Jesus will also be with us every step of the way as we remember to pray through each step. He says, *"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."* We will pray then that we will minister to the straying in Christian love. We pray that the Holy Spirit will give us the appropriate words to use. And we pray that the Holy Spirit will work through us in winning back the lost soul.

I know it's not easy for us to approach a person and tell him he is sinning. But Christian love compels us to do this. I want you to take a moment and think. Is there someone you know that has sinned and therefore is being pulled away from Christ? You know, if you simply compare our church membership with actual attendance, we know there's a problem. At least 50% of our members need to be confronted in love and humility... but directly. They are not regularly in contact with God's life-saving Word. Who can you think of right now who hasn't been in church in a long time? That brother or sister in Christ is in danger. Christ's love compels us to reach out to them. It's not easy to do. It's easy to put off, isn't it? But the blessings of following what Jesus said to us in this text are immeasurable. And so I would ask each one of you to commit to contacting someone *this week* who isn't here for whatever reason. Together, let's win over our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Dear friends, God's will is that all people be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth... the truth about the dangers of sin and about the forgiveness that is ours in Christ Jesus. May God give us the will to minister to the straying with tough love. May God use us as willing instruments in accomplishing his will. Amen.