



# **CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS**

**7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613**

**(319) 277-0924**

**[INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG](mailto:INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG)**

**[WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG](http://WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG)**

## The Prevailing Church: Pursues Strong Community, Part 1

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Rev. Steve Kramer

TEXT: Matthew 18:15-20 (ESV)

“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 charge may be established 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. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in Heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

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Dear Friends:

What do you do when someone in the church hurts you? Sometimes we will hurt one another in the church, I'm sorry to say, because the church consists of people who are both saints in Christ and sinners. We can be selfish and prideful and mean-spirited and sin against one another, sometimes on purpose and sometimes unintentionally. And when it's left unresolved, it can create bitterness between people and eventually bring about a toxic environment in the whole fellowship. It's hard to be the prevailing church when we're divided. Jesus knows that possibility exists, so He addresses it in today's passage.

He says, "If a brother or sister sins against you..." First notice that Jesus is talking about brothers and sisters within the church members. That's what we are in Christ. We're brothers and sisters in Christ. And He says there's a strong possibility that we will sin against one another. We can sin against one another in a variety of ways; it might be with our words, such as gossip or lying or insults, put downs, saying things that ruin someone's reputation. Our words can really hurt one another. Sometimes it's with our actions that range from extremes like physical harm to cheating, bullying, offensive behavior, ignoring... Or we sin against one another sometimes with our lack of loving action when we turn our back on someone's plight, out of apathy or fear of getting involved. Well, Jesus tells us today what we are to do about it when we have been sinned against by someone else in the church.

There's a wrong way to handle it, by the way. The temptation is to get your pound of flesh and strike back, get some kind of revenge, start talking bad about this person and get others on your side. Or you could swallow it quietly and seethe and get bitter of spirit. Then there's the old avoidance technique: avoiding that person, maybe even leaving the church. Then there's the, what I call, the pseudo-fix of saying, "Well, it doesn't really matter." Or trying to pretend it didn't happen at all. Let me tell you, from personal experience, I've tried all these things along the way at one time or another, and I've discovered none of them work. They have disastrous results.

Well, here's what our King, Jesus, commands: that we seek to reconcile with that person who has sinned against us. He says, if your brother sister sins against you, first you go to them personally and tell them his or her fault between you privately. I know that kind of action takes some courage on our part. It does also require some important things on our part, like prayer. We need to be prayerful before we approach that person and ask God, first of all, "Father, am I just being overly sensitive here? Did this individual really sin against me? And if she did, fill me with enough courage and give me the right words and tone of voice to talk with that person about it." We need to go to them with a sense of humility, recognizing that I'm a sinner, too, and I've hurt others along the way. Somewhere I read about the attitude of "CAREfrontation" (instead of confrontation.) You go caring about this person and your relationship with her or him; you go in love and you don't want to fight or feel separated, but you want to regain a sister or brother. You care about this person's spiritual growth. Maybe he or she doesn't even realize the damage they've done to you and to others.

Jesus goes on to say, "If he listens to you," (meaning he or she takes to heart what you're saying and winds up asking for forgiveness and you give it,) "then you've gained your brother or sister back." The goal in all of this is reconciliation. And reconciliation can be quite a joyful experience when you regain a relationship and a fresh start, all that old resentment is now gone. It's a new start. Friends, just think of how much pain could be avoided and togetherness gained in the church of each of us would follow Christ's wisdom on this. Pastor and author Ben Patterson tells a personal story that illustrates what we've been talking about. He writes:

For six summers, Jim was my supervisor at Forest Home, a Christian conference center in California. I held a responsible position over junior and senior high kids, but couldn't pass up a chance to play a prank, like the time I passed off a laxative gum as chewing gum to some coworkers. Word of the rigorous laxative effect got back to my supervisor, Jim. He asked me to come to his office the next day for a little chat. I was still a little defiant when he called me in – there was a long, awkward silence as he leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. Were those tears in his eyes? Then he whispered, "Bennie," with tender affection. "Bennie," he repeated twice when he got control of his emotions. And my arguments disappeared like the vapor they were. I'd gone way overboard, way over the line of propriety, not to mention ignoring compassion. I owed and paid Jim and my victims an apology. We talked about my impulsiveness and vindictiveness and the meaning of Christian community and the responsibility to go with leadership. You see, even in saying the hard thing to me, Jim was always gracious. His goal was not to tear down, but to build up.

Sometimes, though, that first step doesn't work (you may be thinking, because you've tried it.) Sometimes that person just might refuse to listen to you and become defensive and argumentative and obstinate. Then what are you supposed to do? Well, Jesus says in the next step, is to bring one or two others along with you as witnesses and approach that person again. These should be impartial people that are not afraid to tell you the truth. Maybe you're wrong about the situation or you've contributed to the fallout. They can tell you from hearing the evidence if this is real and needing fixing, and they can also stand up for you if they happen to know that, yes, this person did sin against you, and talk to that individual.

But if, unfortunately, this doesn't work, and he or she refuses to listen to the witnesses and repent, then you're to tell the church. Now, what does that look like? Stand up in a

worship service and start taking pot shots? No! Jesus was envisioning small-cell group congregations like there were in the early days of the church, who assembled in homes. Take this matter to the group for discussion. In a larger congregation, it might be taken to a leadership team or perhaps the council or the elders. In that setting, what has happened can be explained, and the church is asked to step in and seek help and repentance from that individual. And if he still doesn't listen to the church, Jesus says, then let him be to you as a pagan or a tax collector. In other words, treat him as an outcast. Dismiss that person from your fellowship. Paul talks about this with the Corinthian Christians in 1 Corinthians 5, as he hears about a report going on in that church, a sexual affair, that's being ignored by the other members. Somebody is being hurt, but it's ignored. And he says throw them out of the fellowship.

By the way, the “you” in “let him be to you” is in the singular, meaning that each member of the church is responsible to abide by the corporate judgment. And this is not to be carried out with vindictiveness. This is not a time to be happy and joyful, that's for sure. This is to be a solemn action requiring solemnity, not glee. You're losing a brother or a sister. And all of this takes some courage, doesn't it; the thought of doing it just makes us cringe a bit. Even us pastors, we like to avoid this one all we can. It seems so harsh. And what if the person brings a lawsuit against you or trashes the church publicly? It's been known to happen, you know. Well, interestingly enough, Jesus doesn't seem too concerned about our feelings and fears on this matter. He's concerned about the fellowship, that there is real evil involved, refusal to face it means a necessary break of fellowship, because reconciliation can only come after the problem has been honestly faced. Church discipline is not an act of revenge to destroy a person, its intention is that this drastic measure will hopefully lead to an awakening and a repentance in the heart of a person so that he or she can come back and be restored into fellowship and be reconciled.

And then Jesus added something that He had told them earlier about binding and loosing. He said, “And remember this truly: I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven. And whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven.” Here we see Him conferring responsibility and authority to the church. He says you are given the authority to regulate the community's life, to keep it from breaking down.

He then concludes the instruction on reconciliation with an interesting statement. He says, “If two or three of you agree on Earth about anything they ask, it will be done for

them by my Father in Heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” Now, it's been suggested by some biblical interpreters that the last words of this passage are not really about prayer, as we have been taught, but about judicial decisions: the binding and loosing and the assurance that as we make these decisions, He's with us. But I'm not convinced of that. Making community work well and having forgiveness and reconciliation occur among members is a supernatural work needing supernatural power. And that supernatural power comes through prayer – praying to our Heavenly Father. We need to bring our conflicts and our situations to the Lord in prayer, in our church, asking His help and direction as we make decisions. And Jesus said it will be done for us by our Father in Heaven. He will guide us and help us in this.

And He then ends it by saying this – this is his promise to us, this church: “I'm with you always, as a community of faith.” These are not only meant to be assuring words of His continuing presence with us, but I think they're meant to be a warning as well. He who is with us will see and know the innermost truth of everyone's heart involved, just as He was able to do in His three-year ministry that we read about in the Gospels. If we take that promise seriously, reconciliation will be costly, it's true; but it will be done with real hope that joy is just around the corner for those who obey Him and persevere in seeking reconciliation with other members of the body of Christ.

Now, do you believe that this can really work, you might be thinking? Well, Pastor Bob Ahlberg tells a story about discipline in his own congregation. He said:

A number of years ago we had the sad experience of disciplining a man by removing him from membership for unrepentant adultery, repeatedly. We followed the guidelines of Matthew 18, and his response was, “I know what I'm doing. I know what you have to do. So do what you must. But I don't care. I plan to never darken the doors of this church again anyway, so why should I care?” And he proceeded to divorce his wife in civil court. His wife continued to attend church and there were many tearful times with her. During prayer meetings and small group meetings, we prayed God would do whatever is necessary to open this man's eyes and bring him back into a right relationship with Himself.

Well, in August, this man called me and asked if we could meet at my office. He threw himself on my shoulder and wept and he said he wanted to confess. He said the hound of Heaven had been on his trail for two years and he couldn't

take it anymore. He set aside his divorce and sought to renew his marriage. Even his wife, who had said she probably could never trust him again, was amazed at the change in his life. This man, you see, was active in the Army Reserves, and his unit had been sent overseas to process the bodies of the military who died in Iraq. God's hand was working in his life as he was confronted daily with the brevity of life and the permanence of eternity. During this tour of duty and upon returning home, he met with his elders, confessed to sin, and asked to be forgiven of his arrogance.

What a joy to announce at the congregational meeting two and a half years later that discipline against this man was lifted and he was restored to the fellowship. And Pastor Ahlberg says, "I'm reminded that when we do things God's way, He does not always respond in our timing over the short term results we desire, but His way is always right and best and true." How true that is.

Now it's important to ask why go to all of this trouble? What's the point of pursuing reconciliation in the church? Well, first of all, we pursue it so that the body of Christ can be a prevailing church that stands strong and united with one another, effectively carrying out the work that Jesus has given us to do of making disciples, instead of constantly holding grudges and fighting with one another. And we are such easy prey for Satan when we are bickering with one another in the church – he can really make hay with division and hard feelings. And when that is going on, we don't get the work done of making disciples for Christ, and Satan smiles with delight. And when we stand strong together, obeying these words of Jesus as a church, we prevail then in our efforts. And we avoid poor public relations for the church and for the kingdom of God. When people on the outside look in and see a fighting church, they think, "Why bother getting involved with that bunch? All they do is criticize, fight with one another, and hurt one another. Nobody wants to join something like that. I can find that anywhere. Why add one more painful experience to life?" And third, we work at reconciliation, loving the church, so that we can stand out and look different from the rest of the world. We are a shining light in the darkness. You see, the church is meant to be a living display of what God had in mind when he first created the world: a loving community that's all about loving Him and loving one another. And it's also a glimpse of the future, when Christ reappears and the new Heaven and new Earth are established once and for all. A church that works at reconciling and forgiving one another and loving one another

stands out in the world, it attracts attention. "See how they love one another," people say, and it attracts people in as your brother in Christ.

Therefore, I need to ask you, are you harboring a grudge, a grudge against a brother or sister in your church? Is there someone that you've hurt and there's a separation out there? Today, I encourage you to do the right thing, the courageous thing, the obedient thing: be a reconciler. Put these words of Jesus, who is God in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself through the cross, into action. Seek the joy of gaining back a brother or a sister. Do it now, first for the sake of your church, your brother, sister in Christ, for your own sake, and most importantly of all, for Jesus, who loves His church and wants it to prevail.

Amen.