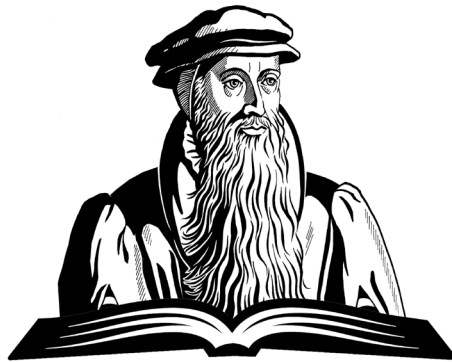


Video Lecture Series
by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

A photograph showing two men from behind, engaged in conversation. The man on the left is wearing a dark jacket, and the man on the right is wearing a dark sweater. They are outdoors, with a blurred background of greenery and other people.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION
IN THE CHURCH

Five Lectures



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

John Knox Institute of Higher Education

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CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CHURCH

Video Lecture Series

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

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CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CHURCH

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

Lecture 1

Introduction

Dear friends, welcome to the studies on the subject of the well-being of the church in the kingdom of God. This group of lectures will detail God's teaching on how to aim at the unity and the peace within the church, or more accurately, within the family of God. Unity and peace are critical to the kingdom of God. Division and disunity have always been Satan's chief weapons in weakening the church of God. And when that happens, it will be harmful to the further building of God's worldwide kingdom. And why is that true? Well, it's because the healthy and the well-functioning church is the tool God uses for the extension of his kingdom. As we all know, the family is the key, the cornerstone to the prosperity of our society. And likewise, the local church family, or the household of God, is crucial for the well-being of God's worldwide kingdom. All believers in the Lord belong to his universal or worldwide body of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, it is a fact that we mostly interact personally with fellow believers in our local churches. It is with this local focus that we will study the Lord's various practical instructions about maintaining unity, or preventing disunity, as well as restoring unity.

Our first study will concentrate on Jesus' teaching from Matthew 18, verses 15 to 35. This passage lays out the Lord's orders in dealing with conflict resolution among the members of a local church. Friends, as long as we live outside of Paradise, there will always be issues that bring strain or stress among believers. Even worse, if not dealt with, these sin issues can lead to ugly divisions. The history of God's church confirms the truth that wherever God builds his kingdom, the devil begins to work full time to hinder it and to destroy it. And what is Satan's strategy in this warfare against God's kingdom? It always has been to divide and conquer. Now, the easiest way to destroy a strong, solid nation is to make it self-destruct. So, provoking a civil war will be the least costly and the most effective to an enemy. The exact strategy Satan has used effectively, as he seeks to destroy God's kingdom, is that—divide and conquer. Outright persecution tends to pull the kingdom people together and actually make them stronger. But inward tensions of division and infighting will quickly weaken the kingdom. It also will make it unattractive to the unbelievers. For who would want to join those who can't get along together?

So, in these studies, we will focus on the will of the Lord Jesus in how to resist Satan's destructive strategies of divide and conquer. His strategy is two-pronged. The Lord says, focus on maintaining purity in doctrine and life, and secondly, on maintain unity among the brethren. It is noticeable how both are uppermost in the Lord Jesus' own prayer in John 17. In John 17, verses 8 and 17, Jesus prays about the purity in truth. He prays, "For I have given unto them the words

which thou gavest me; and they have received them, . . . Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.” Towards the end of his prayer, he prays for unity among the brethren. He says, “Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou has sent me”—this is John 17:21. So clearly, both are intimately related. True unity can only exist in tandem with purity of doctrine and life. The well-known London preacher, Spurgeon, said rightfully, “I am quite sure that the best way to promote union is to promote truth.” And Jonathan Edwards, used by God in the Great Awakening in America in the seventeenth century, said, “Christianity cannot flourish in a time of strife and contention among its own professors.” So, it ought, therefore, not to come as a surprise that the Lord Jesus, through the words of his apostles, has spoken directly and abundantly on maintaining peace among the saints, and how to maintain this. So, let me walk you through a sampling of the main New Testament scriptures in which the Lord emphasizes the unity and the peace among the brethren.

First, let’s go to the example of the new Christian church upon Pentecost. In Acts 4, verse 32, we read, “The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul.” The unity and peace is there. In Acts 9, verse 31, we read the beautiful testimony, “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.” So the church grew in this setting of peace.

Now, quite a number of exhortations are given in the epistles of Paul and others. For example, Romans 12, verse 16: “Be of the same mind one toward another.” Romans 14:19, “Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.” Romans 15, verses 5 and 6, “Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded toward another according to Christ Jesus: that ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Now again, 1 Corinthians 1:10, “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” Second Corinthians 13:11, “Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.” Ephesians 4:1 to 3, “I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation”—or the calling—“wherewith ye were called”—again—“with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” And we move on to Philippians 1:27, “That ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.” And in Philippians 2:2, Paul adds: “Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.” Moving on to Peter’s epistle, in 1 Peter 3:8, “Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous.”

Now, clearly this repeated emphasis of scriptures ought to convince all Jesus’ followers that to the Head of the church, unity and peace is high on the list of priorities. And the reason for this emphasis is not only that dwelling together in unity is good and pleasant for the brethren, it is mostly good, and pleasant, and glorifying to God himself. As Jesus mentored his young and immature disciples, there were two clear occasions that the peace and unity among the little group was in great danger. The first one is found in Matthew 20, verses 20 to 28, where through the agency of their mother, James and John vie for the highest places. Yet it was not only the problem of these two, for in Matthew 20, verse 24, it is recorded, “And when the ten heard it, they were moved with

indignation against the two brethren.”

Now, in the second example, in Luke 22, verses 23 and 24, we find the disciples busy in proving who among them ought to be considered the greatest. Almost teenager-like, they were bragging about themselves, all trying to establish their greatness. And why? to be excused from doing one another a favor. Now, most likely their efforts to be excused was in connection with the scene we read in John 13, where Jesus gathered with his disciples for his last Passover meal with them. Someone needed to do the washing of the feet—a task ordinarily done by a slave or a servant. But each of Jesus’ disciples considered himself too important to do that lowly work. The Lord’s response in both instances is stunning and exemplary. With a gentle rebuke and clear teaching, he nipped this threat to the unity in the bud. In Matthew 20, he did this with golden teaching about who in his kingdom is actually the greatest. He says, he that serves the others is the greatest. He concluded this with the example of himself. He says, “Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Now, in Luke 22, he repeated this teaching, but then he accompanied it with his personal action of washing his own disciples’ feet, as is recorded in John 13. My friends, what a moving display of the glory of our Master, Jesus Christ, the Son of God! And when finished, he gave this direction, as you read in John 13 verses 12 to 15—“Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.”

Now, in this study, we will sit at Jesus’ feet, to consider his teaching in Matthew 18, verses 15 to 35. I will combine this with other relevant scriptures on the subject, such as Galatians 6, verse 1, and Luke 17, verses 1 to 6. But in Matthew 18, Jesus has outlined the pathway how to maintain unity of the body in the face of a serious and disruptive sin. And the importance of this subject cannot be enough emphasized, for if we do not deal Biblically, and lovingly, and faithfully with the issues of sin and conflict, we will lose our main ally in the kingdom—the Holy Spirit. Paul warned about the grieving of the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 4:30—“And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.” In the context of Ephesians 4, Paul is dealing with effective and loving communication among the believers. And if the communication among the brethren is negative through sinful anger, lying speech, bitterness, lack of forgiveness—the Holy Spirit will be grieved. And brethren, no condition is more to be feared for the prosperity and strength of the kingdom, than when the Holy Spirit is grieved. The Spirit is grieved. He stands back. He will withhold his sanctifying and his uniting influences. He will let the wounds fester, and he may even depart from a fellowship, as Jesus’ warns abundantly, in the letters to the seven churches, in Revelation 2 and 3.

When, in those broken or Spirit-abandoned fellowships, we trace back where the decay began, it will often reveal that it began when one sin was excused. For departing from God’s ways always begins the same way! It begins with one small step onto the wrong path! One sin excused will lead to more sins excused. The way of sin is always a slippery slope. Leaving a sin issue in the church family, is like leaving a splinter in the ball of your heel. Now, left on its own, it will make walking difficult. If untreated, it will eventually fester, and infection which can even lead to more dysfunction, and even death. So, let us implore God for his blessing, as we explore this vastly important subject together.

Our theme, on basis of Matthew 18, will be, in these next sessions, God’s way of solving sin problems—loving, and gentle, but clear confrontation is the way. Now before we look closely and in detail at this scripture, let me lay down a few principles that will guide us. The first principle is

that we need to be clear about the Lord commands us to confront our brothers, if they sin against us in any manner. This is clear from verse 15, in Matthew 18. He says, “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go, and tell him.” Jesus echoes the same direction, in Luke 17:3—“Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him.”

Now, doing this confrontation is, according to the Lord’s own teaching, an act of real love. Listen to Leviticus 19:17, where God says, “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him.” Did you hear that? Leaving any sin undisturbed is allowing the sinner to be lost. And therefore, the loving act is not to ignore it, not to ignore a sin that disturbs, or destroys, or separates—it is to confront the offender in love.

Now, if you turn to Genesis 3—the opening chapters of the Bible—you see how God confronted Adam and Eve. He didn’t come storming into Paradise, threatening, or thundering in his displeasure. Instead, he invited them in a gentle question: “Where are you?” In other words, he said, “I want to see you!” Though hurt, though offended, though dishonored by their actions, he seeks to make it right, and he doesn’t want us to hide from him. And notice that God also didn’t skirt or ignore the sin. Instead, he confronted them. He named it. He shamed it. He took off the cover. But what was God’s motivation? It was love—it was love. By his seeking and by his confronting their sin, God said to them, “Look, Adam and Eve, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.” In other words, “I have no pleasure in the state of separation between me and you through sin.”

Now, you move on to Genesis, chapter 4—the same thing happened. He lovingly confronts Cain about his sin, in order to lead him to repentance, and to keep him from more sin! Now, God saw in Cain the first steps on the slippery slope of disobedience. There was jealousy in his heart, there was anger, there was murderous thoughts dwelling in his heart. And with love, he warned Cain, “If you do well, shalt you not be accepted?” And if you do not well, sin lies, like a crouching lion ready to pounce you at the door. Friends, what was God’s motivation? It was his love—it was his care about Cain.

But perhaps you wonder whether confrontation contradicts another scripture, in 1 Peter 4:8, where God says, “And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity”—or love—“shall cover the multitude of sins.” Yet the principles the Lord Jesus here lays down are clear. He says when sins are committed out of infirmity, or immaturity, or weakness, or thoughtlessness, deal with them with love. Now, as parents, we don’t call attention to every weakness and every mistake our immature and young children make. Now, they are young. They are clumsy. They are immature. They may spill the milk, or they may fail to do a chore perfectly, yet they didn’t intend to do either. And so it is with sin. But when sins are done that cause bitterness, or anger, or irritation, or separation, or spite, and bring ongoing conflicts, they are to be confronted and removed, for they will continue to destroy, and destroy more and more.

So, the second thing we ought to be clear about is the truth that, contrary to our expectations, loving confrontation according to Jesus’ detailed instructions, will bring blessings to all the parties involved. Notice in Matthew 18, verse 15, where it says it will gain you your brother. In James 5, verses 19 and 20, the Lord added this encouragement to confrontation: “Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converts the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins” that lie in the train of one sin.

So clearly, after this introduction, we are ready to make a detailed study of our Lord’s orders, in Matthew 18, verses 15 to 20. And I look forward leading you into that study. May God add his blessings to our efforts. Thank you.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CHURCH

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

Lecture 2

Jesus' Instructions on Confrontation

Dear friends, welcome again to the studies on The Conflict Resolution Among Believers. To warm up our hearts to this calling of the King, just for a moment consider these three scriptures on this similar subject. In Psalm 141, verse 5: “Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head.” In Proverbs, chapter 9, verse 8: “Reprove not a scorner, lest he hate thee: rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee.” Also in Proverbs 27, verses 5 and 6: “Open rebuke is better than secret love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.”

Now, as we consider these mandates of the Lord, we notice the unity of the scriptures on this subject. Sin needs confrontation—gentle, loving, clear, decisive, and wise. And in Matthew 18, the Lord has outlined the process how to do this. Experience has proven that following his orders brings blessings. And therefore, each church fellowship, or each local household of God should strive to follow Jesus' instructions.

As we will see in detail, there are four levels, in which we are to deal with the sin issue. First, it always begins on the personal level—examine yourself. This is followed, in the second place, with a private level, between you and the other person. Third, if that is not successful, it moves into the extended level—we are to add a witness to the process. And lastly, it comes to the congregational level, where the whole church is to get involved. Now, after the review of these four levels, I will conclude with a brief study on the desired and the undesired outcome. Obviously, the desired outcome is repentance, which should be followed with the exercise of genuine forgiveness. Now, the undesired outcome is the refusal to repent and reconcile, which, sadly, leads to the excommunication. Well, what is to be our relationship and our responsibility after excommunication? We will look at that in conclusion of our studies.

So now, the first level of confrontation begins with a personal confrontation, or, perhaps better put, a personal examination. Now notice an aspect that is not directly stated in Matthew 18, it is clearly taught in Matthew 7, verses 1 through 5, as well as in Galatians 6, verse 1. In the Matthew 7 passage, the Lord teaches us that we are not to judge others in unfavorable and condemnatory judgment. In the Galatians passage, he directs us to deal with fallen brothers or sisters “in the spirit of meekness.” So first then, the passage in Matthew 7, verses 1 and 2, Jesus says, “Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.” Now Jesus does not mean we cannot judge someone's actions to be wrong or right according to his divine standard. But, the Lord lays his finger at the

spirit in which we are to do this. It must never be in the spirit of “I am better than you,” but instead, in the spirit of, “I am no different than you, for I am also a sinner. And if there is a difference between you and me and my walk, it is because of the grace of God which kept me and guided me.”

Now to get this point across, the Lord makes a remarkable and visual statement, that we first are to consider the beam in our own eye before we deal with the mote in our brother’s eye. The original word “mote” is like a piece of sawdust, while the beam, in the original, refers to the rafter that is used in the building—a beam, or rafter in your own eye; a mote in the other’s eye. Now the message Jesus pictures is powerful. To remove a piece of sawdust from your brother’s eye is a delicate job. Not only do you need gentle hands, proper tools, but you also need clear eyes. But friends, if there is a rafter-like beam stuck in your eye, you would end of doing an amputation of the eye instead of a delicate surgery removing dust. And how often this happens when we confront brothers and sisters within the church family of their trespass against us or the body of the church. Instead of saving their soul and restoring the fellowship, we end up losing him or her altogether.

But how will we then approach the delicate eye surgery of our brother or sister in the proper spirit? How will we become the right tool in the hand of the Master? We become it by following our Lord’s direction with looking at ourselves first. The first direction is that we need to pray to see ourselves in the light of God’s Word. In the Psalms, we find very fitting petitions to help us in those prayers, as we examine our relationship to the subject. Take, for example, David’s petition in Psalm 139, verses 23 and 24: “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Now another such petition is found in Psalm 19, verses 12 and 13. David prayed, “Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me.” How does God answer these petitions, as we lay them before him? How will I be examined?

Well, that leads us to the second direction, in preparing ourselves for confrontation. God answers these petitions through his Word and Spirit. And when Jesus prayed in John 17:17, “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.” So, in his truth that God uses, he sanctifies us. God’s Word is the mirror by which we learn to see ourselves more and more in coming short ourselves in every aspect. And it’s there for no accident that the petitions in Psalm 19, verses 12 and 13, are preceded by a description of the Word of God and the effect upon the believer. Hear these words: “The law of the LORD is perfect”—and what does it do?—“converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure”—what does it do?—“making wise the simple” (verse 7). “The statutes of the LORD are right”—and what do they do?—“rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure”—and again, what does that do?—“enlightening the eyes” (verse 8). So, the same point is made in 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17, where we read: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.” So, therefore, all Christians are to prayerfully place themselves before the searching of the scriptures, for it is through the Word of God that we personally are confronted with our own sins and backsliding, our own weaknesses, our own infirmities. His Word will open our eyes for the areas in our personal life, where spiritual correction or spiritual growth is needed. And friends, seeing our own sins, that will prepare us to face a brother or sister with his or her sins, for what does it do? It makes us meek, by the blessing of God.

And so, the third direction that will prepare us personally to confront a brother or sister in the

church family is the teachings of Hebrews 10, verses 24 and 25. We read there: “And let us consider one another to provoke”—or to stir up one another—“unto love and to good works: . . . exhorting one another.” Now any time you share with fellow saints is an exercise of confrontation, for your example exhorts, or convicts, or encourages others, and others do that to you. As iron sharpens iron, so the interaction of fellow saints with each other will sharpen us in the walk of life. It will also open our eyes for how we fall, as we see ourselves excel in love and good works. Now, seeing our own perpetual shortcomings is God’s tool to cultivate the meekness Galatians 6:1 instructs us about. And God says there, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” Now, the spirit of meekness is one of the most essential characteristics needed to effectively confront a fellow believer on his or her sin. We are to prayerfully seek God’s ministry to make us meek. Meekness is always the fruit of getting to know God. It is the fruit of being in his Word. It is also a fruit of the fellowship with other saints, ministered by the Holy Spirit in us.

Now besides this personal benefit of spending time with fellow members, there is also a preparatory benefit to the exercise of confrontation. For good and positive interaction with others builds trust. You learn to know and you learn to appreciate each other—to trust each other. You learn that there is love and care in the heart of each other. And then, friends, if it then becomes necessary to confront your fellow believer on a sin issue, it will be easier to do so, as there is a basis of trust and respect, and there is a relationship of love. This may make confrontation much easier than having to confront a fellow member you have neglected or ignored, and therefore, have no relationship with.

So, let’s now move on and look at the second level of confrontation. This is to be done, first of all, in a personal setting. The Lord Jesus speaks, in Matthew 18, verse 15, his direction: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: and if he shall hear thee (then) thou has gained thy brother.” Now, there are four specific directions the Lord Jesus gives us in this order.

First, who is to confront the erring brother or sister. We learn that the Lord expects the offended to confront the offending sinner. Listen again, as the Lord Jesus says, If he shall trespass against you, go and tell him. In Luke 17:3, this is reinforced: “Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him.” So each Christian is responsible to be involved in preserving the unity within the body of Christ. Now, therefore, when we see sin, we don’t go and discuss it with others, or talk about it to our spiritual leaders, no, the Lord instructs you to act. You cannot leave it, or you cannot pass it on to others. You also cannot try to ignore it, or cover it with an hypocritical smile, as if no sin is done against you, or as if the sin never happened. The Lord commands you to become a part of the solution, by shouldering your responsibility for the well-being of his kingdom. If he sins against you, you go, and you tell him.

Secondly, whom should you confront? Well, Jesus calls the person “your brother,” and of course, that also includes your sister. So is it everyone who is a genuine Christian? Or is it only those I know personally as a Christian? Well, ideally, it’s everyone who belongs to the body of Christ by faith, yet it is clear that Jesus did not intend that you are to do this to every brother or sister in the worldwide church. It’s clear that brothers you don’t know or you don’t meet cannot directly sin against you. Jesus is, therefore, instructing us to deal with brethren within our own local church family. It is from them we experience the ill effects of their sins.

So thirdly, what should we confront the brother or sister with? Jesus specifies that we are to confront them about their trespass against us. A trespass is a violation of God’s law. It’s a

sinful act—something that is forbidden, or something that is commanded by God. Notice the Lord doesn't specify the sin in this passage, but all and each sin that is public and damaging to us and to our relationship is to be confronted. How far do we define "us" can be debatable. Now, is an unforgiving attitude that someone has against another member, a sin against us? Is a fellow member living in the sin of drunkenness, a sin against us? Now these are not easy questions to answer. But the point is, if such sins affect the body, then it could be argued that they are against us, and therefore, need to be confronted, even if they were not directly against us personally.

The Lord used the word "trespass." Clearly, he is pointing to an action, rather than an attitude or a motive. Attitudes and motives are impossible for us to evaluate in another person. Now, even though someone's words or actions may give us an indication about a sinful motive or attitude, we still are not able to judge the heart. Therefore, trespass is always an action that must be verifiable by facts, not based on feelings, or impressions, or second-guesses. A trespass is also something that is clearly forbidden, or commanded in the scripture, and identified as a transgression of God's moral law or doctrinal teaching. So, for example, a different view that a Christian has in the area of Christian liberty is not a trespass of God's law. And the use of our Christian liberty is not censurable.

Well, lastly, a trespass is also a sin that cannot be overlooked, or cannot be covered with love, as directed in Proverbs 19, verse 11, or 1 Peter 4, verse 8. In Proverbs 19:11, we are instructed this: "The discretion of a man deferreth his anger, and it is his glory to pass over a transgression." In 1 Peter 4, verse 8, the Lord commands, "And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins."

Now examples of sins that may be overlooked or covered with love are, for example, when a brother or sister is unkind, or inconsiderate, or impatient, or they use a harsh tone of voice, or even acted immature. Now such mild trespasses, however, can eventually become a major force of division and destruction. So, love is to cover a multitude of sin, but there are some sins that throw off the cover. So how do I know what to overlook, and what not, in my brother's actions? Well, there are three questions you need to ask yourself.

First, is the trespass creating a tension in our relationship? That's the first question to ask. Does it begin to dominate my thinking? Is it making me turn negative or bitter towards the person? Is the impact of the sin causing friction and division among us as the household of God? That's the first question. Now, secondly, is the trespass I see in the person becoming a sinful habit? Is the person more and more entangled, or hardened to the deceitfulness of this sin, and is it leading in him or her to more sins? Now thirdly, is the impact of this sin doing damage to the cause of God's kingdom? Does his or her sin hinder, for example, the work of evangelism of the church? Is the name of God brought into disrepute among the unbelievers or the outsiders? Those are the questions to ask.

Well, next, how does the Lord instruct us to deal with the trespassing brother or sister? The direction is clear: "Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone." So, before we involve any other person, we need to deal with him on a private level. And what a blessing for the trespasser, if this sin can remain a private matter between you and him. Friends, the world thrives on the gossip of the failures and the faults of others, but Jesus wants his people to thrive on truth and on holiness. And therefore, what is a private sin needs to remain private as long as possible. This not only will be safeguard the name of the sinner, but also the name of God. We all know the damage to God's glory when the sins of his people are broadcast abroad. Keeping trespasses private is therefore God's way of minimizing the negative effects of his own people's sins. Now earlier, we already learned that to tell him his fault needs to be done in love, and in the spirit of meekness, considering

that we all are what Paul confessed in 1 Corinthians 15, verse 10, “By the grace of God I am what I am.”

So in conclusion, let’s review what we learned. The Lord taught us that willful trespasses need to be dealt with locally. They are kind of like the hair cracks in the structural frame of an airplane. Neglecting them will lead to disaster. And that’s why we are to be warned not to give Satan any advantage, as his main strategy is to divide and conquer. Thank you.

In our next study, we will finalize Matthew 18, verse 15, and tie it in with Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 18, verses 21 to 35, as well as Luke 17, verses 1 to 5, and it will be good for you to read those passages ahead of time.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CHURCH

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

Lecture 3

Repentance, Confession, and Forgiveness

Welcome to our third study on Conflict Resolution among believers, as laid out by the Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, in Matthew 18, and particularly, verses 15 to 17. Now before we dig deeper on the Lord's directions, let me try to convince you of the five rich blessings and benefits that flow from Biblical confrontation. This is to motivate us.

First, dealing with sin honors the Lord of glory. As God's holiness is his beauty, so any neglect of holiness makes the cause of God contemptible. Now the second motivation is, dealing with the sinner saves the sinner from death, and stops the rippling effects in the wake of any sin. We noted that in a previous lecture, of James 5, verse 20, "Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins." Now, the third motivation, dealing with sin benefits the offended. Jesus points out this encouragement, in Matthew 18, verse 15: you will gain your brother. And fourth, dealing with sin benefits the whole household of God—think of that. If there remains an Achan in the camp, like in Joshua's day, the whole family of God will suffer (Joshua 7). And Jesus warns about that, in the passages in Revelation 2 and 3, about holding onto false teachers or teachings. If they would not deal with those matters, the Lord would abandon them as a whole. And lastly and fifthly, dealing with sin even benefits the world, as they see the testimony of love and forgiveness, and that testimony will be unimpaired, when we resolve it. Jesus declares, in John 13, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (verses 34 and 35). What a powerful testimony to the King and his glory in such genuine and working love, also in the resolving of conflict.

So, let's recap what we have learned so far in Matthew 18, verse 15, "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone." Now we have observed that our confrontation needs to be, first of all, soaked in love. According to Ephesians 4:15, we are to speak the truth, but in love. Second, it actually needs to be quick. Jesus' command is "Go," and in the original Greek, it has the meaning of, "be going"—don't delay; don't postpone this confrontation. Thirdly, the confrontation should be purposeful: "Go and tell him his fault." The purpose of the meeting is not to have a nice talking time, or a nice time for looking for an opportunity to broach the subject, if it comes up. No, our talk needs to be purposeful, to resolve

an issue of sin. Therefore, be direct, and ask the person, “When is it a good time for you and I to talk about this issue that is on my heart?” Fourth, it needs to be verbal, for we are to “tell him his fault.” The Greek original “tell,” has the meaning of “reprove,” which is therefore, you are to seek to convince the person of his or her wrongdoing that’s hurting you and others. So let’s remind each other that problems are not solved by gestures, or by ignoring, or by avoiding the subject, or any other nonverbal communications. The Lord expects us to discuss it intentionally and Biblically. Now fifthly, he says it needs to be private—it’s “between thee and him alone.” We need to do this to protect the name of the offender, and therefore, our Lord commands us to keep the fault private, among the offender and yourself.

So let’s now trace further how our Lord wants us to approach conflicts, and drawing herein a few other scriptures where God enlarges on this subject. Now, we need to come in the spirit of the Apostle, as we confront each other. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 2, verse 4, as he reflects on his brotherly admonishment he had to give in his previous letter. Note in these words the feelings of his heart. He says, “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote unto you with many tears; not that you should be grieved, but that ye might know the love which I have more abundantly unto you.” Friends, what a difference will it make, when we deal with each other with such anguish of love.

Now, we also need to be gentle, we need to be meek, as pointed out in Galatians 6, verse 1. There we read, “Restore such an one in the spirit of meekness.” Now a person caught in sin is like a person with his bone out of joint—out of its socket. Now if we don’t deal with that bone out of the socket wisely, our efforts to restore can end up in more or even permanent damage. So, be gentle. We need to, therefore, be meek and humble, as Galatians 6:1 indicates. And how? “considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” You and I are capable to fall into the same sins if the grace of God doesn’t keep us back from our own sinful remnants of the indwelling old man. Once, two brothers—let’s call them Senior and Junior brother—were on their way to confront an erring brother about his sin. And while driving, Junior remarked, “I simply don’t understand how our brother could commit such a sin.” Now, upon hearing this remark, Senior, who was driving the car, stopped the car and made a U-turn to return home. So Junior, somewhat surprised, asked, “Why are you going back? Did you forget something?” And Senior’s answer was very instructive, “No, I haven’t forgotten anything, but I’m going back to seek another brother to go along, for you don’t have the right mindset to plead with our erring brother.” Now that’s a powerful lesson.

So, lastly, therefore, we need to be prayerful. All our loving confrontations should be soaked in prayer. Plead with God; beg him to glorify himself through all this confrontation. Plead that the fruit of the Spirit may adorn your meeting with each other. Plead that love may dominate all speech, that longsuffering patience may control us, that gentleness may characterize all the interactions, that goodness and meekness may govern both of us as we speak about it. Pray that faith or faithfulness to the truth will guide us, and that self-control be displayed, and finally that joy and peace may crown all the efforts. Soak yourself in prayer. And the crown of all these labors on this private level is what Jesus described in these encouraging words, “If he shall hear thee”—follow thee—“thou hast gained thy brother.” What a wonderful motivation is this prospect, to restore one from the path of sin, and to be reconciled to each other.

Now, for full reconciliation to take place, we are also to consider what the Lord teaches us in Luke 17, verses 1 through 5. So let’s pull in this passage of our Lord’s will, which is so crucial to conflict resolution. Jesus begins his instruction by reminding us of the reality of this life. In Luke 17:1, he says, “It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom

they come!” In other words, Jesus recognizes that offenses are unavoidable, even among his own people. It cannot but happen, for our sanctification is not complete till heaven. In each household of God, there will be sins that grate, that offend, that wound, or that threaten the unity. We need to remind ourselves that God’s visible church on this earth is not a museum of perfect saints. No, we are to consider the household of God, the church we are a part of, a construction zone, in which God, through his Word and Spirit, is perfecting his people. And, friends, not until God moves his people from grace to glory will there be perfection.

And yet notice that Jesus doesn’t soft-peddle the sins found among his people here below. He says, “But woe unto him, through whom these offenses come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.” Now this among the fiercest language by our most gentle Savior. The warning is clear: Don’t touch those little ones or lead them astray. But then the Lord turns his attention to the offended, in Luke 17, verse 3, “Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him.” What Jesus didn’t add in Matthew 18, is what he added in Luke 17: “and if he repent, forgive him.”

Now repentance is what we desire to see in our offending or trespassing brother or sister. Repentance is a change of our mind that leads to a change of action. Upon taking ownership of the sin, repentance is expressed in a confession, as well as a petition for forgiveness. Now, in repentance, you humble yourselves before the offended, and you say something like, “Yeah, I now see the way I talked, or the way I acted to you was very wrong, was very hurtful, and was sinful. Yeah, I was wrong! I’ve done this wrong, I’ve sinned to you in doing this,” and then name the sin. And that should be followed with, “Will you please forgive me?” Why is that so hard to ask—to ask someone to forgive you? Because you are a proud people. We hate humbling ourselves. Humbling ourselves and confessing you’re wrong kind of feels like a defeat, doesn’t it? However, such humbling, and such confession is a huge victory! Now, it’s not your victory as the reprover, or it’s not your victory as the repenter, it is the victory of the Majesty of heaven, who makes our hearts willing in the day of his power to humble ourselves. If, by God’s grace, you master your own spirit, you are stronger than he that conquers a whole city by himself (Proverbs 16:32). Nothing is harder to our proud human natures but to humble ourselves before a brother or sister, and to name and to shame our sins, seeking their forgiveness. That’s the goal. That’s what we’re looking for when we confront a sinner, either on the private level, or in the subsequent steps of public or corporate attempts to lead someone to repentance.

So, let it be clear that the exercise of forgiveness is also commanded, but only when there is an expression of repentance. Listen again as Jesus says, “And if he repent, forgive him.” God does not forgive sin when there is no repentance in our hearts, and no confession with our mouth is made before him. It is the absence of repentance and confession that makes the sin against the Holy Ghost unpardonable. The sinner who committed this sin never comes to a returning and a repenting, and a seeking of forgiveness. And when there is no repentance, expressed in confession, and seeking God’s forgiveness, even the Lord does not forgive the sinner. Although he is ready to forgive at all times, he does not forgive the sinner. And so, you and I are to be ready to forgive. We are to communicate with our words and our attitude. But actual forgiveness is only possible when there is repentance, followed with confession, and the asking for forgiveness.

So, if our private or our subsequent corporate confrontation results in the expression of repentance, the Lord’s unconditional command is, “forgive him.” “To forgive,” literally, in the Greek, means “to send away as far as possible, out of sight, as far as the east is from the west.”

To forgive, friends, is like sinking a sin into the depths of the ocean, from where it is irretrievable. To forgive is to put away the sin, so that you will no longer dwell on it. It's not saying, "I forgive you," while you hold onto a grudge and will treat the repentant sinner as if he still is your enemy, and have nothing to do with him or her. Now, to forgive as Jesus commands us is one of the hardest things to do. It's not in our nature to be forgiving. Never think, therefore, about forgiveness as a glib exercise of words. It is instead one of the most demanding exercises of love.

And just as a side note, this is even more difficult for those who have been deeply and permanently wounded by the sins of others. Not all sin is the same. To be lied against, or to be cheated, or to have someone steal your money, or slander your name, that's definitely sin. But to be abused, to be violated, to be shamed, to emotionally mutilate someone are sins that leave the person deeply damaged and lifelong scarred. And the lifelong effects will be with that person. In such cases, when sin has had such serious impact, let us never think or speak lightly about forgiveness. For such wounded hearts, extra-special grace is needed to truly, truly forgive. And even when such forgiveness is exercised, in such cases of abuse and mutilation of emotions, we need to remember that this does not always mean a complete restoration of a functional relationship in this life. Now, for the protection of the fragile and the wounded victims, safe distances may need to be maintained, even from those who have repented, and who are forgiven abusers.

To top this all off, our Lord concludes his direction about forgiveness with an astounding extension. Here it is: "And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him." Perhaps the disciples looked at each other with a big question mark in their eyes, "Really, Lord? Is this truly what you require us to do? Really? Who is sufficient to forgive like that, and to do it again and again? How can we be so loving and genuine and generous to do this time and again?" In Matthew 18, verse 21, Peter ventured to ask the Lord Jesus if seven times was the limit. The Master's answer on that question is even more stunning: "Jesus saith unto him"—to Peter and to us—"I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven."

Well, notice how the disciples responded to his "forgive multiple times"—"Lord, increase our faith." Isn't it surprising that they didn't ask for an increase of love? For it is clear that great quantities of love are needed to forgive seventy times seven! It is true we need great amounts of love to forgive a great many times. But where does such love come from? Such love only comes from Christ's Spirit living in us. It comes when we believe how God forgives us, willingly, joyfully, and repeatedly, at the greatest possible cost to himself. It may seem unrealistic that my brother would sin against me seven times a day, and come back to me seven times a day. My friends, it is not unrealistic that I sin seven times a day against God. How often do we fail to love the Lord with all our heart and mind and strength throughout the day? How often do I fail to love my neighbor, including my spouse, my children; certainly not my enemies, with the same love that Jesus loved his neighbors, even his enemies? Besides the sin of action, there are the sins of lack of action—there are the sins of omission. And therefore, in that light, even seventy times seven each day is not unrealistic in our relationship to God.

And do you see now the connection why the disciples asked for an increase of faith? If I daily live in the joy of the forgiveness of my staggering debt to God, it becomes much easier to forgive the small sins others do to me. Then it becomes even possible to do what is, humanly speaking, impossible, as Jesus said, "If ye had faith as a grain of [a tiny little small] mustard seed, ye might say unto this [huge] sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you." In other words, even if your faith in God's magnificent forgiveness

of your sins is as small as a mustard seed, it will enable you to show love to your neighbor in forgiving him.

And let's remember that through forgiving my brother or sister, even though that may be difficult, it never carries the infinite cost God had to bear to forgive you. For him to forgive even one of our sins meant the cross-death of his only and well-beloved Son, Jesus Christ. And who of us can measure such love for us rebels, to sacrifice his Son to make our forgiveness possible. Seek grace to know, and to live, and to abide in the faith of God's forgiveness of our sins for the sake of Jesus Christ. And only then will you and I be able to master the revengeful and the offended spirit against our brother who has trespassed against us, even if he did it repeatedly.

What if this personal confrontation does not lead to its desired goal? Well, in that case, the Lord Jesus lays out the specifics of our next actions, and we will consider that in our next study on this subject.

Thank you, and may God bless these words.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CHURCH

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

Lecture 4

Surrounded with Prayer and Love

Dear friends, welcome to our fourth study on the Lord's instructions, regarding conflict resolutions within the household of the saints. Now these studies are mainly centered on Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18. Step by step, the Lord has detailed how we are to handle sins that bring stress and strain, and that could lead to deepening division in the local household of faith. Now, if the Lord's instructions are followed, it will prevent the easy-occurring disappearance of tenderness and affection for each other's true welfare. For when we do not confront each other on the sin issues openly, timely, and in love, we may end up bitter, or we may talk about each other negatively to others. And once this happens, the evil spreads like an infection or cancer in our own body, and it self-destructs the body. But most critical in following Jesus' instruction is to have the mind of Jesus Christ, for then nothing shall be done to strive for vainglory. Instead, we will, with lowliness of mind, esteem each other as better than ourselves.

So, as we have seen, there are four levels of confronting a trespassing brother or sister. First one is beginning at our personal level. We have to examine ourselves on our sins, and that is to be a continual exercise in our personal life. Seeing our own continual failures will, with God's blessing, bring meekness in our own lives—it's so essential. This mindset is so crucial, when we approach the delicate act of confronting a brother or sister with the trespasses of God's law that they are or have committed. And then comes the second step, on a private level between you and the other person. And again, let's pray for the mind of Jesus. And when God confronts us with our sins, he comes with a readiness to forgive. And that's his whole purpose—to make it right, even the willingness to sacrifice his rights to make reconciliation possible. Now, the third step is the extended level, when we add one or two witnesses to the process. And the last step is the congregational level, where the entire church, or part of that, gets involved. And we'll look at those in this session, as we explore God's directions on the extended and the congregational level.

Now back to Matthew 18, and verse 16. The Lord states this: "But if he will not hear thee." Well that means that the personal confrontation, as outlined in verse 15, has, sadly, failed. Having spoken and having pleaded patiently, the trespassing brother has chosen to resist the exhortation. "He will not hear"—that means he has consciously chosen not to respond positively. Now maybe he disagrees with the allegation, or he is unwilling to repent about the sin that has been committed. So, when the Lord directs us to move to the second level of confrontation, he does not tell us to

do this immediately. There's no indication that the instructions in verse 15 means "only do this one time, and then at once move on the extended level in verse 16." God himself shows great longsuffering with us personally, how often does he not plead, heaping coals of love upon the head of the wicked. How long does he persist in seeking to overcome evil with good? It would therefore be God-like to show patience with the sinning brother. Yet, there comes a time, when the Lord expects his people to make the next move to the next level. He says, "But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." This second level is called Confrontation at an Extended or Combined Level." Now what are the exact details in this second tier?

First, we are to find one or two others to assist us in this reconciliation act. Depending on your personal confidence, or the nature of the trespass, or on the person you are to confront, the Master leaves it open whether you seek the assistance of one or of two fellow believers in this process. But who are we to take? Now that choice is totally influenced by the task these helpers are to fulfill. Notice, the task is not to strengthen your case, for then you would undoubtedly find your most supportive friends. Their task is to fight against the powers and the devices of the prince of darkness who is destroying the fellowship. And besides, their task is delicate, and therefore, it needs to be a person of spiritual maturity, and experience. Their task is to remove a trespass which is threatening the unity and peace among the brethren. In order for them to do this task well, they also need to be independent. For that to be the case, they ought to hear the story of the problem, not only from you. They have to do their own research first. For notice, that the Lord Jesus calls these helpers that you take along "witnesses." Now witnesses, friends, are not people who have heard the story only from your side. They are people who have independent insight on the case that is at hand and are, therefore, able to provide their witness to the case. The persons who are to assist us are, therefore, people who need to hear all sides. For them to verify the truth independently is vital, for a pre-biased helper is not an independent or not a credible witness. He is merely more ammunition on your side to make your point. And what happens usually? Adding such to your effort usually does not bring healing, but it brings explosion. It is therefore so crucial that the one or the two assistants are qualified people. In the previous lecture, I likened this work to the precision work of an eye surgeon. Imagine an eye surgeon seeking the assistance of a blind person, or a rough miner who is used to work with big drills and hammers and explosives. No, we are not to look simply for those who are sympathetic to us, or are nice people, or are close friends. There may even be great wisdom in choosing someone among those witness who have close relationship with the offender, as long, of course, as this person is able to remain objective.

So to conclude, seek for persons who are people of integrity, meekness, impartiality, and credibility. James described the qualified persons as men who possess the wisdom that is from above, first pure, then peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And notice, the witness also have to be aware of the seriousness of their task, once they agree to be your assistant. The seriousness of the task is described in another portion of the scriptures, in Deuteronomy 17, verses 6 and 7. It says there, "At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death." And then, "The hands of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So thou shalt put the evil away from among you." Now in the New Testament times, the final act of the witnesses are to partake in the excommunication of the offender from the fellowship. Now all of this reinforces the seriousness of the task the witness is given. Let me add that each member in the household of

God is to develop, or to grow themselves for such a role in the body of Christ. Friends, you never know when you may be called upon to act as a mediating witness in the resolution of conflict between fellow members in the church. Well, how do you prepare yourself for such a possible task? Scriptures tell you: a steadfast walk, and prayer, in which you may mature in the faith, in which you may get the wisdom from above. And those are important elements in the preparation you and I are to do for this, perhaps, future task.

Now back to Matthew 18. With the Lord's blessings, these steps laid out by the King himself, they should resolve most problems that enter into our local household of faith. Yet, that is not the case. We are commanded, after ample time has been given to seek a resolution, to move the matter to the fourth and final phase—the congregational level. And the Lord's direction is given us in verse 17: "And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."

Now first, let us note that the Lord again does not indicate a time frame. It's not after one meeting with the trespassing brother or sister that we immediately enter into the last and the final stage of this process. In the medical world, no doctor will hasten the amputation of the arm or the leg of his patient. It would be his very last resource after all the means have been exhausted. It's good to remind you that church discipline that we're here talking about, as outlined by the Lord, is not a punishment. It is spiritual medicine. Its main purpose is to bring healing to the sinner and in the body, and restoration on a personal and on a communal level. Consider this church discipline kind of like the intensive care given to a patient in the hospital. It's a whole team of doctors and nurses who apply their wisdom and their loving care to the patient, and likewise, the entire congregation is to marshal forth all their resources God has given to seek salvation of the sinner.

Now secondly, the Lord described the response of the sinner as, "But if he will not hear thee." Again, the word "hear" as used by the Lord, in the Greek has the meaning of refusing. It has the character of the stubborn unwillingness to deal with the sin issue. Sadly, it reveals, therefore, a hardening attitude of resistance to amend and repent.

Thirdly, the instruction is that we are to tell it unto the church. That is not an option, it's not a suggestion, it is a divine command. Christ does not allow us to drop the issue after the previous attempts have failed. Perhaps such a temptation will be felt, for in this last and this final stage, the sin issue will be made public to the entire fellowship of the congregation. And this could make a deep stir in the body of believers, especially if it is a sin that involves the leadership of the church. Well, let all God's children follow the instructive example the Lord Jesus gives us himself in his letters to the seven churches, in Revelation 2 and 3. I've mentioned that before. He brought the sins in the open, to urge all to repentance. And if the congregations did not return to God's way, the Lord would follow it up with his judgment. And so are we.

Fourthly, he says we ought to tell it to the church. Now the word "church" refers to the body of believers united by faith through Jesus Christ. By all means, we are to avoid that the sins of a brother or sister will be made public in the wider community of the surrounding world. We are to tell it to the church. Now, the sins of God's people, friends, do more damage than the assault of the devil and his followers can ever do to the name and the cause of our great God. And since the public nature of this last step is such a serious matter, some churches have adopted a wise rule, not specified in the scripture, but wise indeed. They have agreed among each other that before they move to this last and final stage, that they would seek the independent review of this case by the leaders of another household of faith—a neighboring church. They ask others to review whether they have followed all of the Biblical steps in dealing with this straying member. Now,

such an independent peer review is commendable, as it holds us to accountability in following Jesus' instructions, as given in Matthew 18. It's also following Solomon's counsel, when he says, "In the multitude of counselors, there is safety."

But then, who exactly is meant here with "the church?" Is it every single member of the church community, and of like in a combined meeting of all the local believers of the church? Or is it made known to those that are appointed to represent the church, such as pastors and elders, and maybe in a smaller congregation, including the deacons. Is that the church? Well, as the Lord has not given us the exact boundaries of this "church," it is at liberty to develop their own methods, in according with the direction given in this verse.

But what is the purpose of sharing the sin committed to this enlarged audience? Well, the first purpose is to enlarge the circle of love that is going to be applied to this straying brother or sister. When a congregation is informed about the nature of the sin, it is a call to unite together in prayer and fasting. The well-being and the salvation of one of their own is in grave danger. Typically, churches convene in prayer circles, when one of their members is facing a serious crisis in health or in business, and we come together to pray and perhaps to fast. But the crisis a straying member faces is far more serious than a temporal sickness or a material setback. His or her soul, and her relationship with God is in danger. Now the second purpose for that additional effort may be applied to bring the straying member back from his or her destructive ways. Making the name and the sin public, that's a serious step, and it needs to be done with great, great care. And each church family ought to develop their own guidelines on how to do this wisely. It is vital. It is so important that these guidelines are developed before a conflict arises. Now, you know it is wisdom to build your bridge in calm waters instead of a raging stream. And so, develop these guidelines ahead of time. I'll give you an example of such guidelines, that could be followed and adopted by you, and followed in your church.

First, once a sin issue has become known to this last level, the leadership of the church would inform the sinner privately first that he or she is temporarily excluded from partaking in the Lord's Supper, or from a leadership position within the body, until repentance has occurred. You could call this "silent censure." And if no repentance is witnessed, the church leadership makes a public announcement that one of their members has been placed under a first level of censure for a particular trespass. Now the congregation is asked to join in supplication for one of their fellow believers—no name given, but simply there is one of us erring. Now, after sufficient time has been given the straying member to show remorse and make a confession, the church leadership moves to the next step of censure. Now the person's name and his or her trespass are shared with the congregation. To mention the name and the sin is according to Paul's direction and example. In 1 Timothy 5:20, Paul instructs Timothy, "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." One other example is Philippians 4:2, where he writes: "I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche that they be of the same mind in the Lord." In 1 Timothy 1, verse 20, Paul singled out Hymenaeus and Alexander, and tells them they are men to avoid, as they caused divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which they learned. So the purpose of this public naming is not to inform the body of believers so everyone can talk about it. No, it is a call to the fellow believers to action. At this point, before the final act of excommunication, we are not to avoid this straying or this stubborn sheep which is entangled in sin. Instead, we are to surround them in prayer and in the practice of love.

And then fourthly, last step, and most serious step, is excommunication. Nothing, nothing is more serious than the carrying out of Jesus' last direction, "But if he neglect to hear the church,

let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” The hardened and the unrepentant sinner is to be put out of the fellowship of the body. As a destructive cancer or a dangerously infected limb, the formal connection of this member to the rest of the body needs to be severed. Formally, the members, as well as the congregation, need to be informed that a brother or sister has been cut off from the household of saints. Other scriptures describe this action with the most solemn terminology. Paul referred, in 1 Timothy 1:20, to two brothers who were “delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.” That’s strong language. In 1 Corinthians 5, verses 4 and 5, Paul gave instructions to a member in the church who lived in open defiance of the seventh commandment, and he instructed the church to do something. Now this man lived in a scandalous sexual relationship with his stepmother. The duty of the church was, “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh”—for this purpose—“that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” How solemn is sin that will lead to the severing and the separation of close and beautiful relationships. May God prevent all of us ever to err so deeply that it becomes necessary to be excommunicated from the fellowship.

So in our next and our last study on this subject, of Matthew 18, we will explore God’s reasons for the severity of this action. And we will seek to know his will how now are we to deal with the excommunicated. And may God bless us with his grace and his wisdom in all these matters.

5 CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CHURCH

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

Lecture 5

Excommunication and Restoration

Dear friends, this will be the concluding study on the passage in Matthew 18, on the loving confrontation of brothers and sisters in your own fellowship. The Lord's detailed instructions in Matthew 18 is his good and his holy will. Following his directions in the spirit of love and meekness has time and again proven to be the path to blessings. For when we deal timely, and when we deal lovingly with the trespasses within the body, with God's blessing, it will prevent the destructive division that is ugly, and it will bring a mutual healing among God's children, which is so desirable.

So in this final study on the subject, let's first give attention to our Lord's words in Matthew 18, verse 17: "But if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." No action a church is to perform, on behalf of the Captain of Salvation, the Lord Jesus Christ, is more serious than the cutting off of a member from the church family and fellowship. And based on these instructions of the Lord, the Apostle Paul implemented this action in his letter to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul addressed the issue of a brother in the church, who was living in an open transgression of the seventh commandment. He writes, "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as it not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife." Now Paul rebuked the church fellowship of having ignored this sore evil. And now, since it's no longer a private sin, because it's commonly reported, Paul immediately proceeds to instruct them to execute Jesus' command, as stated in Matthew 18, verse 17. And he writes, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh"—1 Corinthians 5, verses 4 and 5.

Now there are different interpretations of this passage. Must we consider this an Apostolic power or authority not given to God's church today, or must we consider this as a rigorous description of the acts of excommunication of a member? Now, though it may be that Paul's act was more than the act of excommunication, let us at least use it as the illustration of excommunication. Paul's purpose is not, get rid of the member, or, punish him with a number of physical afflictions inflicted by Satan on him. No, not at all. Ultimately, the purpose of his rigorous action of this formal excommunication is that this brother may come to repentance of this soul-destructive sin. And therefore, notice that Paul added, "that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."

In other words, this excommunication will, hopefully, be temporary, and has the sole intended purpose to bring healing to the sinner, and restoration of the relationship that is now broken.

All church discipline is always to be considered and used as medicine, administered to an erring member of the body. Never is a church called to punish a transgressor for their sins. The punishment of a sin belongs to the civil authority of the government, according to Romans 13, verses 1 to 5. They have the sword of justice.

So, what is now the Lord's will after excommunication? What is to be the relationship of a faithful believer to this unfaithful and unrepentant sinner that is now cut off from the fellowship? Jesus' next direction already answers the question. He says, "Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." The cut-off member is no more to be considered and treated as a spiritual brother or sister. We may not continue to maintain the same brotherly relationship as we did before, as far as this is possible of course. Again, let's listen to how Paul fleshed this out in 1 Corinthians 5, verses 9 to 11. He writes, "I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world." We're not to be on terms of familiarity, or in a habit of close intimacy who professes to be a believer, while living wickedly and to the dishonor of God. In Jesus' own words, "Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."

Now, the best way to understand this direction is for us to consider how Jesus himself interacted with the unconverted, and with the unrepentant Jews or Gentiles. What was his attitude, as well as his level of interaction or communion with those who openly lived a disobedient and dishonorable life? How did Jesus then live in relationship to them? Did he entirely shun and shame them? Did he do everything possible to stay as far away from such as possible? Or did he have an arrogant or a judgmental attitude towards them. Did he speak evil of them, so that everyone else would hate them? No, no, the Savior himself did not do any of these things. Instead, he sought them, as a shepherd seeking lost sheep. He prayed for them, as a father for his lost son. He shared the gospel with them, as a preacher full of compassion. He went out of his way to even sacrifice for them, all to win their hearts. Yet, he did not have a close relationship with them while they lived as unbelievers, as he did have with his faithful disciples. He drew a line. They were not his bosom friends. They were not his close friends. He could not have that relationship. That privilege is only reserved to those who love him, who walk with him, and who show their love in honoring his person and his divine will. And they will experience the promise Jesus gives us in John 14, verse 23, "If a man love me, he will keep"—he will honor, he will respect—"my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him."

Now all added up, the Lord calls us to seek the excommunicated brothers or sisters as the objects of evangelism. We are to seek to win them with our walk and our talk for God and his kingdom, to win them back. And if they're hostile to us, we are to love them still. Isn't the Lord's command, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you"—Matthew 5, verse 44. Or, think of Romans 12, verses 20 and 21, where we are exhorted, "Therefore if your enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head"—we cannot ignore that—"Be [therefore] not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." That is what his will is, and what a joy, when such labor of love and compassion, and such riches of our goodness will lead to godly sorrow and repentance through salvation. And if that happens, we are to receive the repentant sinner back into our fellowship. Paul also wrote about that, in 2 Corinthians, chapter 2, verses 6 to 8, referring undoubtedly to the brother who was excommunicated in the previous letter, when he says, "[Brothers,] sufficient to such a man is this punishment"—or the discipline—

“which was inflicted of many”—meaning, the local leadership and the membership of that church. “So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and to comfort him [again], lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him.” You see this example in Corinthians of putting an unrepentant brother outside the fellowship, and receiving him back upon repentance, illustrates the truth Jesus stated in Matthew 18, verses 18 to 20: “Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Now Jesus reveals here that when his people on earth faithfully and prayerfully execute the discipline of fellow Christians, according to his revealed will here in Matthew 18 and other places, and in reality, it is his own personal authority that is executed on earth through his faithful church. The being together in his name referred to in verse 20, is not simply referring to being together for prayer or fellowship in Jesus’ name. No, in this context of Matthew 18, it refers to being together in the authority of Jesus Christ, and to act in his name in the matters of ecclesiastical discipline. Jesus’ revelation of his own presence in these discipline matters brings home the weightiness of these actions for his church. For, if we, as his people, act according to his revealed will with the straying and the unrepentant sinners, as well, of course, as with the repentant and the returning sinners, we truly represent Jesus Christ, as King and ruler upon earth.

Now, what a solemn truth this is. When an unrepentant brother, on Biblical grounds, is excluded from the fellowship, then the action is the revelation of God’s own exclusion of such a sinner from his fellowship. But the reverse is also true. When the church absolves the repenting brother from the excommunicating sentence, again, according to God’s word, then this again is the revelation of God’s own absolution of the sinner. One who sincerely repents, and sincerely confesses his sin before the church ought not in the least to doubt that he is assuredly received of God in mercy. For Jesus Christ said, in John 20, verse 23, to his apostles, “Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them”—remitted is forgiven—“and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.” What a sweet comfort is thereby also communicated to a trembling conscience. Such fearful souls may, by the official sentence of the church, be assured that they are freed from guilt in the sight of God, as they are reconciled with the body of the church. John Calvin concluded his comments on John 20, verse 23 with these thoughts—he writes: “For Jesus has appointed this as the pledge of heavenly grace. This has no reference to hypocrites who pervert the proper use of reconciliation. But it is intended to awaken in the godly an ordinary confidence, for as soon as they have obtained forgiveness from the church, they hear that their sins are blotted out before God and the angels”—so according to Calvin. This teaching, or this confronting a trespassing brother or a sister, and the command to forgive them prompted Peter’s question, undoubtedly when Peter says, “Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?” Now Peter, perhaps, was reminded of the instructions Jesus gave in Luke 17, verses 1 to 5, that we have looked at in a previous session. And brother Peter wondered, in Matthew 18, verse 21, if after the seventh time, Jesus would release them from the requirement of forgiveness. And very gently, the Lord Jesus instructed his disciples that seven times wasn’t the upper limit—the upper limit is unlimited. “Jesus said unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.” The parable that follows then, in Matthew 18, in the closing section of this chapter, is one of the most moving Jesus ever told. With the example of the unforgiving servant, Jesus reinforces the important

principle. He requires of all his followers to be forgiving and remain forgiving. The main points that we need to take along from this parable, in Matthew 18, verses 23 to 35, they are as follows.

First, as you read it, the king represents God. He is the sovereign Father to whom we all owe a staggering debt. The servant in this parable represents us sinners, who have clearly abused God's gifts and the tasks that we have as his stewards. Now the debt in the parable is represented as massive—ten thousand talents, which in today's world, would amount to multiple millions of money. The amount pictures the infinite debt of sin we owe to God, and obviously are entirely unable to pay. And then, in the parable, the compassionate act of the king pictures God's gracious pardon of all our sins against him. His forgiveness is total. It's absolutely free for us, but we know, of course, that God bore the infinite cost for forgiveness, for God's forgiving meant to condemn his Son, when he took the place as a substitute for our sins in life and death. And then, the reluctance of this forgiven servant to forgive the miniscule debt of a hundred pence to one of his debtors stands in stark contrast with what God did. We are forgiven a lifetime of sin against God. Well, God calls us to forgive others' mere little acts of sin done to each other, and some of them, indeed, are big acts. Jesus called the unforgiving servant "wicked" and he has delivered him to jail. Now with this, Jesus condemns entirely the attitude, in which we are unwilling to forgive an erring brother or sister. Saved people are both to be forgiving, and they are forgiven, and therefore, a reluctance to forgive fellow sinners really questions any claim to be saved. So, with this very impressive parable, the Lord drives home our lofty calling to forgive fellow believers, even those who have repeatedly fallen into sin.

So in conclusion, let us learn and practice church discipline on each other. Let us see it as medicine administered to patients. That medicine is usually not sweet; it may taste extremely bitter, but we administer it to the patient, though it is bitter. And so, church discipline, it may feel bitter, it might look rigorous, and therefore, we may feel the temptation to not ruffle the feathers or disturb the feelings of a fellow brother or sister in the church. Far be it from us to fall into such an attitude. It was the attitude of Eli, as we quoted in 1 Samuel. His rebuke to his sons was attempted with a soft touch, but it was not followed with the decisive action of tough love. We need to read it in 1 Samuel 2, verses 23 and 24, when God says, "And he"—Eli—"said unto them"—his two sons—"Why do ye such things? for I hear of your evil dealings by all this people. Nay, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear: ye make the LORD's people to transgress." Now, later, a man of God came and spoke to Eli, and he accused him of serious neglect. And he said this: "Wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice and at mine offering, which I have commanded in my habitation; and honour your sons above me" (verse 29). And finally, the Lord spoke to Samuel about the judgment he would bring upon the house of Eli, and this judgment would make the ears of everyone that hears it tingle. And why? What was the crime of Eli? Again, let us hear God's own words in 1 Samuel 3, verse 13, where God says, "For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not." So together, as Christians, we are to heed the severe judgment God brought upon the house of Eli, as a warning to us. Eli was negligent to use his authority as a father and as a priest, and thereby he brought great destruction upon the nation of Israel. So what was true then will be true today. Well, let us live by God's own words: "For them that honour me, I will honour; and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed" (1 Samuel 2:30). So, God bless us all to be healthy churches, and a healthy church is a church in which, besides the faithful preaching and teaching of his word, we also use the faithful means of church discipline, and then, in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, to the glory of God, and to the building up of each member of our fellowship.

So, this completes our review of Jesus' teachings in Matthew 18. Our next study will be on Jesus teaching on conflicts that often arise in the realm of our Christian liberty. And we'll look particularly then at Romans 14, and the first verses of Romans 15.

Thank you, and may God bless his word to his glory and to our profit.