

# "Dealing With Sin"

Matthew 18:15-17

September 4, 2011

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

What do you do with a fatal disease? You could do nothing. Ignore it and hope it goes away. That would be the easiest thing to do but it would mean that the patient would surely die. You could try for a quick fix – some wonder drug or miraculous therapy that was inexpensive and easy to do. Again, it wouldn't be difficult but it also probably wouldn't be effective. The patient would die. If a disease is serious, the only way to cure it would be through serious treatment – surgery, expensive medicine, and continued therapy. The actions would be difficult and at a high price but they would be worth it if the patient's life would be saved.

Along the same line, what do you do with sin? Sin is the one certain fatal disease which affects all people. The Bible declares, "The wages of sin is death," (Rom. 6:23) and "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Rom. 3:23). What would a holy and righteous God do with a fatal disease like sin?

He could do nothing. Ignore it and hope it goes away. He could pretend that sin wasn't all that big of a deal. That would be the easiest thing for God to do – simply wash His hands of the whole sordid experiment known as "humanity." However, to do nothing would mean certain death for all sinners like you and me. And that is not only physical death (which would be bad enough) but eternal death, apart from God and all that is good, in place called hell which God created for the devil and his evil angels.

God could show mild interest in our affliction and try some quick and easy fix. Maybe He could try sending us a few punishments to try and turn us away from sin. Maybe He could try a few holy words from heaven to make us better inside. It wouldn't take much effort from God to do those things but I think you can see that they wouldn't much good.

To really take care of sin and cure those affected by it would be a most difficult job. God could not stay in the comforts of a holy heaven. He'd have to come and be among sinners. He would have to get His hands dirty by taking on the form of one of those sinners. Like a surgery which is long, difficult, and expensive, God would have to put forth great effort and pay a high price to cure sin and give life. Yet God was willing to do that because of the great seriousness of the disease of sin and out of His great love for all afflicted by that disease.

He did all of this in His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus left the glory of heaven and set aside for a time His divine powers to come to this earth. He became like one of us – fully human, yet without sin.

He confronted the disease of sin head on. The holy and sinless Son of God took upon Himself all sin of all people of all time. He identified, not only with sinful human beings, but with sin itself. The Bible says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21)

Jesus then did something very extraordinary. He allowed the terminal disease of sin to take its toll on Him and kill Him. Jesus endured the full wrath of a holy God which should have been directed against you and me. Jesus accepted the punishment for sin from a just God which included not merely flogging and crucifixion, but physical death on the cross and spiritual death in hell. By doing this – by taking our place – we received the cure for sin – God's forgiveness and Jesus' holiness.

We are reconciled – at peace – with God because of this. We know that by Jesus' resurrection from the dead. The empty tomb and the living Jesus were God's stamp of approval on the work of His Son. It was a most difficult thing for God to do – to send His Son to this earth, to heap the sin of the world upon His back, and punish His only begotten Son with all of His wrath and justice. Yet He did it because sin was serious enough and He loved you that much.

Since God has taken away the fatal disease of sin which kept Him and us apart, how should we then deal with sin that keeps us apart as brothers and sisters in Christ? Do we see the sin of a

brother or sister in the Church as a serious faith-menacing, life-threatening matter? Do we love each other enough to deal with sin among us?

If a brother sins, especially when he sins against you personally, what do you do? You could do nothing and hope that it goes away. That's the easiest thing to do. We don't want to confront anybody. "Live and let live", we say. But this method is the most ineffective. It doesn't deal with the sin and the threat to faith and life remains. We are still at odds with the brother or sister who has sinned.

We could try some quick fix and hope it helps. This is fairly easy to do, too. We can say to ourselves or anyone who knows the situation, "Oh, it's ok!" We hope that will smooth it over. But you know it doesn't work, does it? It's not "ok". The sin festers beneath the surface in our relationship with the one who has sinned. We are not reconciled and at peace with that individual.

If we really want to deal with sin among us because it is so serious and if we really want to be reconciled and at peace with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, it's going to be a long and difficult task. We can't hold back and wait. We will have to give of ourselves. Jesus shows us what that means in our Gospel lesson today.

Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." Dealing with sin means confronting sin, not ignoring it or hoping it goes away. It means speaking of sin, but only to the person who has sinned against us. We are not very good at this. When someone has sinned against us, we tell of this sin to almost everyone *except* the person who has sinned against us. If someone sins against you and you bring that sin to anyone other than the person who sinned against you or if you listen to anyone bringing someone else's sin to you, you are acting contrary to our Lord's words.

We do that because we gain support for ourselves – how we've been mistreated and sinned against. But that is not the purpose for what Jesus is telling us here. Speaking of the sin is not to

rally support for ourselves. We speak of the sin *only* to resolve the sin and be reconciled. Jesus' ideal is, "If he listens to you, you have gained your brother." Repentance is done. Forgiveness is shared. You are reconciled and at peace with the brother or sister. The sin dies and is put into the grave, never to be resurrected as fuel for future fights.

Jesus recognizes the fact that the brother or sister may not listen to you. He or she may deny that they have sinned against you. For many of us, that would be it. "I tried and it didn't work. It was hard enough to do that. I can't do anything more." But love for the brother or sister will not allow us to let it go at that. Sin is a serious matter and can threaten faith. We cannot let it rest.

So, Jesus says, "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." We are to take a couple of people along with us and talk to the brother or sister again. They are not to help us to intimidate or coerce the person to change, but to serve as witnesses of sin who can lovingly point out that sin to the sinner, not to win the argument, but to bring about repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Still, the sinner may resist the Word of God and call to repentance. Then (and only then) does Jesus say, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." This is where many people start when they are in conflict with someone. People will come to me and say, "Pastor, so-and-so did such-and-such to me." When I refuse to hear them and direct them BACK to talking to the individual who has sinned, they are angry. Why? They want me to go and punish them. But remember the purpose here is NOT to win the fight or punish a person but to make peace with one another through the forgiveness of sins. This can be a long and slow process which must not be short circuited. After repeated attempts of speaking to the person individually and repeated attempts of speaking to the person with witnesses, it is then and only then that the pastor and leadership of the church be brought into the conflict, not to help win, but to help bring about reconciliation.

Jesus never intended this process to be misused as a simple and quick three part way to get rid of the deadwood on the church membership roles. This is never to be used to exclude people because of their sin, but to bring people back by forgiving their sin. However, some people's hearts will be hardened and they will refuse to be reconciled. What to do then? Jesus says, "And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." What does Jesus mean here? He does not mean that we should shun such people or refuse to speak to them. Gentiles and tax collectors were considered to be outside of the people of God for their refusal to repent. "Jesus' words simply say that the person is a non-disciple, no more and no less." (Gibbs, p.920)

I've had people say to me that Jesus' words are good "in theory". They act as if Jesus' words are not realistic and that no one should be expected to act this way. It's just too difficult and intimidating. I do not agree that Jesus meant for His words to be taken theoretically or that He does not expect us to actually follow them. I do agree though that doing this is very difficult and very intimidating. However, doing nothing is not an option. Sin is too serious. Quick fixes won't work. Dealing with sin is a long hard process. We do the work because God's love for us is too great to let sin go on in our lives. When His love flows in us, it will be too great to let sin go in a brother's life or a sister's life. Therefore, we will not let sin go, ignore sin, or simply try to triumph in our conflict with anyone who sins against us. God's love flowing through us will move us to do anything and everything we can, individually, with witnesses, and as a church together, to induce our brother or sister to see their sin, repent, and receive forgiveness. Bringing about reconciliation: that's how we deal with sin! Amen.