

Disputes, Reconciliation and Discipline in the Body of Believers

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Delivered to Ohev Yisrael March 9, 2013

Two weeks ago, I spoke to you on our need to forgive, and I showed you Scriptures that define for us two kinds of forgiveness that I called "unconditional" or "personal" forgiveness, and "conditional" or "judicial forgiveness." I summarized the subject in these three points:

1. Personal Forgiveness is unconditional, must be granted to believers and unbelievers alike, and clears the way for ourselves to be forgiven by God.
2. Judicial Forgiveness, on the other hand, is conditional, and is only granted to a believer if an offended brother believes him to be repentant; this clears the way for the offender to be forgiven by God.
3. If we are sinned against, one of the first things we must do is exercise Personal (or unconditional) Forgiveness toward the offending person. This is vital because, unless we purge ourselves of unholy attitudes that have resulted from our being victims, we are not in a proper frame of mind or spiritual condition to follow through with decisions that are subsequently required of us.

Today, I want to speak further about how we are to handle disputes and offenses within the body of believers broadly and within local congregations such as Ohev in particular. In doing so, I must apologize in advance that, while the subject is thoroughly biblical, is also somewhat technical; but it is very important that every believer understand it.

As you consider what is presented, however, keep in mind that maintaining loving and reconciled relationships with our brothers and sisters is among God's highest priorities, and is the purpose of all of this so, to keep our spiritual grounding, we will periodically pause and recite together Luke 6:31, followed by Leviticus 19:18:

"Treat other people as you would like them to treat you. Don't take vengeance on or bear a grudge against any of your people; rather, love your neighbor as yourself; I am ADONAI."

Now, let's begin.

It is important to know that there are two kinds of offenses that can be committed by us that affect others. I will call the first a "private" offense because it is the kind where one brother sins against another brother. I hope that I will not create such an offense against my sister believers who are listening to this, by my not continually saying "brother and sister" or "him and her," or "he and she." For simplicity I will just say "brothers" when I mean "believers," and will trust you to understand and forgive me. Now of course, believers are not the only ones who commit offenses, so I will say "persons" if I mean either believers or unbelievers.

A private offense is the biblical equivalent of what are called "civil offenses" in the public or secular law. It is an offense (we call it a sin within the body of believers) – it is an offense by one individual that is committed against another individual. By contrast, a public offense, within the body of believers, is a sin committed by a brother against the body of believers broadly, analogous to what we call a criminal act in the secular law. So to be clear regarding these definitions:

- A civil offense in secular law is an offense committed by a person against another person, and similarly, a private offense in biblical law is a sin committed by a brother against another brother.
- A criminal act in secular law is an offense committed by a person against society at large, and similarly, a public offense in biblical law is a sin committed by a brother against the body of believers at large.

Sometimes the same offense falls into both categories at the same time; permit me to give an example using Leviticus 19:16 which states:

Do not go around spreading slander among your people,

A brother who gossips a falsehood about another brother to the assembly of brothers commits the private offense of slander against his brother in that he has damaged his brother's reputation. On the other hand, he has also committed a public offense against the entire congregation because he has introduced a poisonous lie into it, and has therefore injured or potentially injured everyone.

When an offense has been committed, the first thing one must do is decide if it is a private offense or a public offense, or both, because different Scriptures apply to each kind of offense, and the means of resolving each of them are therefore different. The way one decides is to ask oneself: "Who is adversely affected by the sin?" If it is one person or a specified number of persons, then the offense is private. If it is the community at large, then the offense is public.

Time for our spiritual grounding; together now:

"Treat other people as you would like them to treat you. Don't take vengeance on or bear a grudge against any of your people; rather, love your neighbor as yourself; I am ADONAI."

First, private offenses: There are two parties to a private offense – the offender and the one who has been sinned against; let's call him the "offended." As I said in my previous message, the first thing the offended party should do after forgiving his brother is to remember Proverbs 19:11, and decide whether he should overlook his brother's sin. If you are the offended party and you choose to not overlook the sin, then you must seek reconciliation with your brother through the process given in Matthew 18:15-17, which requires that you first confront our offending brother with his sin:

Matthew 18:15: *Moreover, if your brother commits a sin against you, go and show him his fault- but privately, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won back your brother. Also,*

Galatians 6:1: *Brothers, suppose someone is caught doing something wrong. You who have the Spirit should set him right, but in a spirit of humility, keeping an eye on yourselves so that you won't be tempted too.*

There are three things in these Scriptures which stand out. First, when we go to our brother to correct him of his fault, our attitude must be pure, and our demeanor proper. The operative expression in the Galatians Scripture is "a spirit of humility."

Second, we are to go to our brother alone. That means we are not to share our complaint with others before first giving our brother the opportunity to explain himself or repent and make things right.

Third, our purpose for confronting our brother must be to restore him to righteousness, and our hope must be for reconciliation. Although in cases involving damage or loss we may also seek restitution as part of the reconciliation process, we must not sue our brother in a secular court. You may recall from my previous message that 1 Corinthians 6:1-7 prohibits it.

Time again for our spiritual grounding; let us read together:

"Treat other people as you would like them to treat you. Don't take vengeance on or bear a grudge against any of your people; rather, love your neighbor as yourself; I am ADONAI."

Now, if the offending brother agrees with the substance of our complaint and repents, the matter is concluded, and we must forgive him judicially. If he does not agree or he refuses to meet privately, Matthew 18:16 states that we must go to our brother again, and this time with one or two witnesses:

If he doesn't listen, take one or two others with you so that every accusation can be supported by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

These witnesses need not be to the offense complained about (although they may be), but rather to what is said during that second meeting with our brother.¹ Our usual concept of witnesses is that they are silent observers but, in this case, they are there to help determine which of the parties to the dispute is wrong, and to urge that person to listen to reason and repent. This is made clear from the first words in Matthew 18:17:

If he refuses to hear them,..

¹ Although not addressed in Scripture, fairness allows the offending brother to invite his own witnesses as well.

As before, if the parties come to agreement or the offending brother repents, the matter is concluded. If however, the attempt at reconciliation is unsuccessful, the whole of verse 17 becomes operative:

If he refuses to hear them, tell the congregation;

Most theologians understand this to mean that a court (or *bet din*) of congregational leaders who are authorized to judge should be assembled – in our case, the elders.

Time for our spiritual reminder:

"Treat other people as you would like them to treat you. Don't take vengeance on or bear a grudge against any of your people; rather, love your neighbor as yourself; I am ADONAI."

Scripture does not say which elders ought to be assembled to hear a Matthew 18 controversy, but the natural assumption is that they are the elders of one's own congregation. That works well when the disputants are members of the same congregation and the elders are not, themselves, parties to the dispute. But as with most of God's instructions, the Matthew 18 process is designed to operate in an ideal biblical society. In the First Century, congregational elders oversaw entire cities, and sought to be in unity with the elders of other cities. This is rarely the case today, as the *ekklesia* of believers is fragmented, and local congregations often do not communicate with each other. Nevertheless, when needed, elders to judge matters can be drawn from other congregations and even from other New Covenant faith denominations. Tikkun congregations are blessed in this way, for we have the elders of our sister congregations to assist us when they are needed.

But we are not finished, because a *bet din* does not only hear cases, it renders judgment. So, after a hearing is held, the judging elders consider the evidence and render a judgment as to who is right, and who is wrong. They may also order certain remedies such as restraining orders, and orders of restitution. As part of Tikkun's rules, Tikkun member congregations adhere to an appeal process by which a party that has been found at fault by a congregation's *bet din* may appeal to the elders of Tikkun who function in the same way as do appeal courts in the public sector. Upon final judgment, however, all parties to the *bet din* are required to obey, or bear the sanction stated in Matthew 18:17:

.. and if he refuses to listen even to the congregation, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax-collector.

This treating a believer as though he were not a believer is sometimes referred to as "disfellowship" or "excommunication" It is a common misunderstanding that when a believer is excommunicated pursuant to Matthew 18, he must necessarily be ejected from the congregation. On the contrary, after excommunication, a professed believer should continue to be loved, and be treated as an unbeliever in every way, which includes offering him our hospitality. Although he must be refused Communion with the brethren, unless he is also a violator of 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 (i.e. walking in immorality while calling himself a believer) or Titus 3:10-11 (being divisive or otherwise being harmful to the body), he should be encouraged to attend congregational services and other events of

the body, where he is likely to hear the Word of God, and be encouraged to repent and return to full fellowship.

One consequence of a Matthew 18 excommunication that is very serious is that the complainant is released from the constraint of 1 Corinthians 6:1-7, and is therefore free to sue the unrepentant excommunicant in a secular court.

It is again time for our spiritual grounding, so let's read together:

"Treat other people as you would like them to treat you. Don't take vengeance on or bear a grudge against any of your people; rather, love your neighbor as yourself; I am ADONAI."

Another common misunderstanding is that a decree of excommunication applies only to the excommunicating congregation or denomination. Biblically, that is not so. Judgments arising from Matthew 18 proceedings apply across the entire body of believers, and so long as correct biblical doctrine is applied and due process is afforded, congregations of all denominations are biblically required to recognize each other's *Bet Din* judgments. What is more, God Himself recognizes and honors the authority He delegates to *Bet Dinim*, for we read in Matthew 18:18:

Yes! I tell you people that whatever you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.

A judgment of "disfellowship" is reversible in the same way as the status of being an unbeliever is reversible. What is required is that the sanctioned brother repent of his former sin, comply with all orders of the *bet din*, and receive Yeshua again as his Lord and Savior. Ideally, the same *bet din* that ruled previously is convened to judge the professed repentance and, if it is deemed genuine, the tribunal sets aside its prior judgment, and publishes a decree of restoration. This restoration which is bound on earth is also bound in heaven.

But what if the offender is us? Scripture speaks to that as well, for in Matthew 5:23-24 we read:

So if you are offering your gift at the Temple altar and you remember there that your brother has something against you, leave your gift where it is by the altar, and go, make peace with your brother. Then come back and offer your gift.

If we know or suspect that we have sinned against a brother, we are not to wait until the brother comes to us, we are to go to him. The renowned writer Jay Adams has been known to say that ideally, between Matthew 5 and Matthew 18, the offender and the one who is offended should meet in the street half-way between their respective homes, because each is on his way to seek reconciliation with the other.

Back to our spiritual grounding:

"Treat other people as you would like them to treat you. Don't take vengeance on or bear a grudge against any of your people; rather, love your neighbor as yourself; I am ADONAI."

I have spent most of this message on private offenses because they are the kind that most often occur. However, public offenses within the body do occur from time to time, so let us look at those now.

A public offense within the body of believers is a sin committed by an individual against the entire congregation, or against believers at large. This kind of offense is the biblical equivalent of a criminal violation in the Public sector. Public offenses pose a danger to the community, so the primary responsibility of a community's elders is to protect the flock by ministering both correction and discipline to the offender. Hebrews 13:17a exhorts:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your lives, as people who will have to render an account.

The goal in public offenses is different from the goal in private offenses. In 1 Corinthians 5:1-2 and 5, the Apostle Paul reveals how he would have the Corinthians deal with a particular public offense, and reconciliation is furthest from his mind when he says this:

*It is actually being reported that there is sexual sin among you, and it is sexual sin of a kind that is condemned even by pagans- a man is living with his stepmother!
And you stay proud? Shouldn't you rather have felt some sadness that would have led you to remove from your company the man who has done this thing?*

... hand over such a person to the Adversary for his old nature to be destroyed, so that his spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord.

You notice that here there is no Matthew 18 process; Paul is saying that the transgressor should have been summarily removed from fellowship.

An individual congregant is often the first person to become aware that a public offense has been or may have been committed. Although (according to Galatians 6:1-2) he may confront the perpetrator for the purpose of ministering correction and urging his brother to repent, he is not authorized to act for the community in either judging the matter, or deciding what remedial action should be taken. Therefore, in all but trivial cases, the congregant-citizen's duty is to report the offense, along with any evidence he may have, to the community's elders.

When a believer is removed from fellowship as the result of his having committed a public offense, it is different from a Matthew 18 excommunication, in that the offender is expelled from the community and denied even private fellowship until he repents and the elders no longer view him as a danger. There are five behaviors in Scripture for which such expulsion may (or even must) occur:

(1) A person considered a believer who is walking in unrepentant immorality, which is spoken to in 1 Corinthians 5:9-13.

(2) A person representing himself to be a believer, who is in gross error by not being in accord with the Gospel and Apostolic doctrine, spoken to in 2 John 1:9-11 and Galatians 1:8-9.

(3) A believer who is disorderly in his lifestyle, spoken to in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15.

(4) A divisive person (whether or not a believer) who has been warned twice, as spoken to in Titus 3:10-11 and Romans 16:17-18.

(5) A rebellious person (whether or not a believer) who scoffs at the Word of God, spoken to in Proverbs 22:10.

In the first three cases, the danger to the body comes from the offender holding himself out, or being considered to be, part of the body – a believer – yet being in significant sin, professing heretical doctrines, or walking in a disorderly manner. While these traits are expected of unbelievers, a professing believer with such characteristics brings discredit to the body. Such behaviors can also present a stumbling block for new believers who are not yet fully disciplined, and whose discernment is not yet fully developed.

The fourth and fifth cases apply to all persons who sow discord, whether or not they are believers. It makes no difference that the divisiveness or rebellion is unconscious or unintended; it is dangerous and contagious in the community of believers, and those who practice it must be excluded.

In all five cases, repentance restores the offending brother to fellowship, and the unbeliever to being welcome once again. Restoration is not automatic, however, for whether or not an offender's repentance is genuine, is a matter to be judged by the same elders who judged and disciplined him in the first instance.

A special case that should be mentioned is where a person has reason to believe that his brother believer has committed a significant violation of the public's criminal law. Although a prudent covenantal first step would be to consult elders of the body for their wisdom in how to proceed, a brother may, nevertheless, go directly to the secular governing authorities, provided his reason for doing so is his concern for public safety, and he is relying on Romans 13:1 which states:

Everyone is to obey the governing authorities. For there is no authority that is not from God, and the existing authorities have been placed where they are by God.

There is so much more that I can say, and I have already trimmed this message down by not reading many Scriptures that are applicable. So let me end with some pastoral advice. As imperfect humans, we are all capable of offending and also of being offended. When this happens, the issues between us loom large, and we go into a fighting stance because resolving them to our way of thinking seems paramount. If you remember nothing else about this message, remember these two things: (1) the difference between private and public offenses; and (2) that God considers reconciliation and maintaining our loving relationships with each other far more important than vindicating ourselves in any argument with our brother.

So, let's conclude by once again reciting Luke 6:31 and Leviticus 19:18:

"Treat other people as you would like them to treat you. Don't take vengeance on or bear a grudge against any of your people; rather, love your neighbor as yourself; I am ADONAI."