

Admonish One Another in Love

Dear friends,

You have a problem. Someone offended you. Not just done something irritating, this person actively sinned against you. Maybe it was someone you know well or love: a friend, your spouse, a co-worker. Or maybe it's someone you're not well acquainted with: someone from the neighborhood, or someone you only know from church.

What do you do? So often we end up “playing games” as they say, especially if we're not all that comfortable talking with this other person. We tend to avoid such people. If that's not possible, we give them the “silent treatment,” or we pout or brood. It seems easier for us to stay quiet than to take the initiative to work things out, doesn't it?

Be thankful that this is not how God deals with us. We have all offended God—and not just in little ways, we have actively broken God's laws very seriously. But God has not given us the “silent treatment.” God actively reached out to each one of us, sending his Holy Spirit to lead us back to him and to plant faith in our hearts. God was willing to take the first step, to go the extra mile. He even sent his Son to earth to pay for our sins. God himself took the initiative, reached out to us, and brought about our reconciliation with him.

Now God wants us to be reconciled to others. God wants us to take the initiative, to reach out across that barrier of sin. In today's Gospel from Matthew, Jesus encourages us to make things right even when it's not our fault: even when we're the one who has been sinned against. It's possible to do that, when we're dealing with other Christians.

God tells us, Admonish One Another in Love. This is not easy, so our Lord gives us plenty of guidance. Today we'll look first at our manner toward someone who sinned—that is, what our attitude is. Second, we'll look at our method for reconciling. And finally want to remember the means God has given us.

Admonish one another in love. Why would we want to do that? I suppose you might think that your life would be less stressful if you worked out your differences with other people. But we have a greater reason to deal with other people's sins. As a matter of fact, it becomes pretty urgent for us to take the initiative, when we think of the consequences that person's sin has for his or her soul.

Sin kills. “The wages of sin is death,” Paul wrote. Of course, Jesus died to pay for all sins, so God is eager to forgive everyone and give everyone eternal life. But when a person refuses to admit his sin, that person is telling God to get lost. He's saying, “I don't want your forgiveness, I want to hold onto my sinful ways.” When someone insists on rejecting God's love, that person is going to get the punishment his sins deserve.

Out of love for such a person, we'll want to warn him or her of the danger of holding onto sin. And if that person is a Christian, they should listen. Maybe not at first; it's not easy admitting you're wrong, is it? But that makes it all the more necessary for us to admonish such a person. We must admonish one another in love, and our manner must first of all be to do it urgently.

But our manner will also be to do this humbly, because we recognize that we are sinners, too. On the one hand, it would be very easy for us to look at the sins of others while ignoring our own faults. On the other hand, it's easy for us to use this fact as an excuse for not doing anything—that is, we don't want to appear “holier than thou.”

But it's when we realize that we are sinners that we are most effective in admonishing others. We can say to our Christian brother or sister, “you know, I'm a sinner, and I've done similar things myself. But God's forgiven me. And now I want to point out your sin so that you can be sure that God has forgiven you, too.” That's an attitude of humility.

Jesus mentions one other aspect of our manner in admonishing one another. He says we are to “point out their fault, just between the two of you.” We are to admonish one another privately. That means, don't gossip about another person's sins.

Gossiping is certainly a great temptation when we see someone else sinning, especially when they sin against us. And I'm not just talking about the gossip you hear, I mean the gossip you speak. It doesn't matter if it's true or not. If it is going to hurt someone else, it should not be spread around. When you hear someone gossip, please stop it from spreading any farther. And if you see someone caught up in a sin, speak to that person himself or herself. Do it privately.

When we admonish one another, we do it urgently, humbly and privately; but we also admonish others confidently. **“If they listen to you, you have won them over.”** That's our goal, and that's what we should expect. And if it doesn't happen, and we need to involve other Christians, we can be confident that the Lord will bless our effort. **“Truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them”**

We've seen the manner in which we are to admonish one another. Now let's review the method our Savior gives us. **“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.”** Notice that Jesus says, “Go.” Don't wait for the other person to apologize. Don't just sit there and sulk. You actively go, take the initiative. **“Point out their fault”**—that's the hard part. You may have to point the person to Scripture—again, you can do that with a Christian. Remember, your manner is to be humble, as well as urgent, private and confident.

“But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” Jesus says to do that only if the other person refuses to listen. You probably will have to go by yourself several times before you can truly say that that person has refused to listen to you. But if so, out of love for that person's soul, it's your responsibility not to give up. Maybe if someone else comes along, the person will realize it's not just your opinion that they sinned. Again, be urgent, be humble, be private—just the one or two others should be involved. And be confident that the warning will work.

But, **“If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church.”** The congregation may have to take action, again, out of love for that person and his or her salvation. This will involve time, it will involve meetings, but it's something we Christians will do for one another out of love.

“And if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” Tax collectors in Jesus' day were private bill collectors and they were invariably corrupt; no honest person would do such a job. To treat a person like **“a pagan or a tax collector”** would mean treating him as an unbeliever.

Does that mean being rude to the person? No. Jesus met with and preached to pagans and tax collectors, because he loved them. We, too, are to love even those whom we may have to remove from our congregation. Indeed, it's at just such a time that a sinner needs to hear God's Word the most.

We call this final action an excommunication. It is not something we do lightly. But it is something we may have to do, and we will, because Jesus here commands it. St. Paul wrote about a case of excommunication in 1 Corinthians. Excommunication is the church telling a person that he or she is in mortal danger. It is done out of love, not out of spite. We want to win the person back. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul implies that the person referred to in 1 Corinthians had repented, and now he was to be welcomed back into the family of believers.

Jesus gives a lot of direction for the method of admonishing one another. But we must remember one final point: the means God gives us to admonish one another in love.

When pointing out someone's sin, we need to remember that all sin is directed against God. The Bible calls sin "trespassing"—crossing over the line, the line of God's law. So when we show someone his or her fault, our basic tool is God's law. Refer to the Ten Commandments, which summarize God's will for our lives.

And when a Christian brother or sister repents, that is, admits their sin, we are to use God's other tool, the Gospel. That is the Good News that Jesus has paid for all sins, even my worst sin, and as a result, God is willing to forgive us, no matter what we've done.

All Christians have these tools, the Law and the Gospel. You don't need to be a pastor to use them. And these tools are powerful. Jesus pictures it as binding or loosing sins here on earth. The Law points out a person's sin and really binds the person's sins to him, thereby locking the door to heaven. The Gospel frees us from our sins and opens the door to eternal life. Christ gives these keys to each and every Christian, and he tells us to use them out of love for one another.

When we see a Christian brother or sister caught in a sin, that is, not repenting of what they've done, don't just sit there. Admonish one another in love. Watch out that your manner is correct: be urgent, humble, private and confident. Use the method Christ lays out: go yourself, and only if you need to, take another Christian along. And use the means God gives: the Law and the Gospel.

Take the initiative, just as God took the initiative to reconcile you to himself. Amen.