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Matthew 18 and the public rebuke of sin

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"Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. 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. 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." (Matthew 18:15-17)

Very often the first response to any public witness against sin, or the public censure of a Christian who has sinned publicly, is an accusation that to make such a public denunciation is contrary to the Saviour's teaching in this passage. Usually it is asserted that there cannot be a public censure of sin until private overtures have been made to the offender. This has the effect of diverting attention from the original error and focuses attention on the one trying to protest against it. But what does this passage teach? Is it addressing the matter of public sin at all?

There is a number of important observations to be made about this text:

1. This is an instance of a private offense. A brother has sinned against a fellow-believer. There is sin involved but it is seen to be of the nature of a private offense or hurt. In the area of personal interaction wrong has been done. Though an individual may feel offended by a fellow Christian's defiance of God in the public arena, and be stirred to speak out against it, this is far from being merely a matter of private offence. Offence is taken for the Lord's sake, for the sake of His cause, for His truth's sake.

2. The two individuals in view are under the same oversight in a local congregation. *The church* here is a reference – according the synagogue model – to the local eldership/oversight of the congregation. Both the offender and the offended party are under the same disciplinary structure. It is part of proper order and procedure in the Church to work within the established governmental structures in such cases.

3. In such a case private overtures by the offended party to the offender must precede any public action. The various levels of private response detailed in v15-16 must be followed before there is an elevation of this matter to official church involvement. To by-pass this initial private response to private sin is to disobey God.

4. Clearly, this passage does not address the procedure to be followed in a case of departure from God's word in the public realm. The rebuke of a Christian who has acted unScripturally in a public way is not in view here at all! When a man has sinned before all, that sin warrants a rebuke before all. This is especially necessary where a public example of disobedience is being set and is in danger of being followed by others in the Church.

It may be that, in certain instances of public sin, private overtures may be helpful initially. Yet it is patently not true to say that they are required by God in advance of any public rebuke of sin.

It is also clear from God's word that public defiance of God's word by a professing Christian merits a public rebuke without the necessity of first following this 'private approach' protocol. "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." (1Timothy 5:20) Here Paul is addressing the sin of elders in the Church.

Several examples of this public rebuke of sin may be cited:

- Matthew 16:23 – The Saviour denounced Peter immediately and publicly for his foolish words. It was important for the other disciples to see immediately that what Peter was suggesting was of the devil! The Saviour acted quickly and publicly because of the serious danger that lay in the attitude that had spoken these words.



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- 1 Corinthians 5:3 – Paul denounced the notorious offending believer in Corinth, even instructing the elders of that congregation to hand the man over to the devil for the destruction of the flesh. This was a very high level and public censure by the Church. Yet Paul was not even present when he wrote these words. There was no private approach followed by Paul nor did he instruct the elders to take such an approach. Public sin required immediate public action.
- Galatians 2:14ff – Paul denounced Peter publicly and immediately for his hypocrisy and folly. Barnabas and others were caught up in this foolishness that was instigated by those who came as the emissaries of the Apostle James. These were ‘high powered’ offenders! Two Apostles were directly or indirectly involved in this sin. Yet although all were within the same Presbytery structure and although Paul recognized the purview of the court of the Apostles and elders (Acts 15:2) in deciding such questions, he immediately and publicly rebukes Peter. Clearly, he does so to prevent the spread of this erroneous practice which was a threat to the very basis of the gospel – though Peter obviously did not see it that way initially.
- 2 Chronicles 19:2 – Jehu the prophet sternly and bluntly addresses King Jehoshaphat in a public rebuke of his sinful alliance and fellowship with the wicked King Ahab. There is no private approach, no sparing the feelings and sensibilities of the godly Jehoshaphat. He had done wrong publicly and because he was an influential leader of the people of God, in danger now of leading them deeper into fellowship with apostasy, he must be rebuked openly by God’s man.

It is not wrong to rebuke the public sin of a Christian without recourse to the ‘private approach first’ protocol. When there is public defiance of God’s order by an elder, a minister, etc then public rebuke is in order and necessary for the sake of defending the cause of God from harmful influence.