

OFFENSES

Ordinances of God

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By
Steven Greene

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compared to the day of our redemption when we will hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant! Because you were faithful and loved much, enter into the JOY of your Lord” (paraphrased from Matthew 25:23 and Luke 7:47).

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Chapter Six

Conclusion

Offenses are serious matters to God. Dealing with them has been one of the most overlooked and often ignored responsibilities of God's children. People are generally very reluctant to speak with someone who has caused an offense because many, even converted saints, are too filled with self to tolerate a rebuke. What does that say about us? How can anyone claim to be a child of God if we refuse to humbly hear someone tell us that we offended them? How can there be repentance without the humility to acknowledge an offense to God and others? Without repentance, there is no forgiveness from God and our eternal life is at stake.

On the other hand, how many victims of offenses are able to approach someone in true humility and meekness? Many react with anger to the offense, whether it was intentional or not, and use the status of a "victim" to justify refusing to forgive the offender or betrayer. Again, what does it say about us if we are angry and unwilling to forgive? Beware, because God will not forgive our sins if we are unforgiving, which could be grounds for the second death. While the memory of an offense or betrayal usually remains with us in this life, God desires to heal our hearts so that we are able to forgive others.

Repentance and forgiveness are critical to our relationship with God and our brothers and sisters in Christ. Anyone who does not have a humble and contrite heart and strive to show *agape* love to others will not be in the Kingdom. While it may not be possible for relationships to continue between people as they were before a serious offense or betrayal, we must strive to reconcile as much as possible or prudent.

Remember the popular saying, "What would Jesus do?" That has always been the wrong question—because God's thoughts and ways are so much higher than ours (Isaiah 55:9) that we cannot easily answer that question. The right question a true Christian should ask is, "How can I show *agape* love to others?" There is nothing more difficult than dealing with offenses, but the reward is eternal. The trials and sufferings of this life are nothing

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one spouse might need to discuss a personal issue that does not involve the other spouse, matters should never be discussed outside the marriage without including the other spouse. Examples where it might be fitting to have a discussion without the other spouse include seeking help with something personal such as a spiritual problem or health issues (menopause, etc.).

It is also very appropriate to seek help outside the marriage when the other spouse has committed adultery, fornication, or abuse. These should be taken quite seriously and the guilty spouse is certainly not in the best position to offer advice to the victim. Seeking outside help without the other spouse in these cases is usually highly recommended.

The remaining two points apply to all offenses. Be quick to recognize and address every minor issue to prevent them from even becoming an offense. Also remember that offenses will occur in every marriage, but those that are dealt with promptly will also be quickly forgotten. Relationships founded upon *agape* love and accompanied by proper marital love will have little time for, or need to, reflect on past offenses. Husbands and wives who put God first and spend time building their emotional, mental, and physical relationship are not only blessed, but have the best defense against offenses.

- 7) Spouses who do not discuss the logistical matters of life—finances (budgeting and spending priorities), children (especially their discipline and upbringing or when they leave home), retirement planning, etc. This leads to unspoken expectations that can cause much resentment.
- 8) A husband who expects the wife to satisfy unhealthy sexual fantasies. Many times this manifested in the form of complaints that the wife is overweight or is not fulfilling and exciting as a sexual partner. This is not loving, cherishing, and caring for the wife. Instead, it is discouraging and can cause resentment.
- 9) A wife who believes that the husband is responsible for making and keeping her happy and content instead of seeking these things from God. A converted husband will be much more responsive and sensitive to a wife who is filled with the peace of God.

Reconciling offenses *should* be easier in a marriage than any other relationship because each knows the strengths and weaknesses of the other. This allows them to build upon the former and strengthen the latter. Instead, too many husbands and wives let offenses linger and build to the point where there is enmity between them.

The reality is that, aside from adultery, fornication, and abuse, there should be nothing that causes more than a brief disruption in an otherwise loving marriage. Having joy in marriage requires effort, but it is very simple in principle.

First, their relationship with God must be their top priority. When that happens, each spouse has the love of God upon which their relationship can be built. Love always considers the needs of other spouse, which makes it all but impossible for offenses to occur.

Communication is the second key. A wife who expects her husband to guess her every mood or desire is completely unreasonable. Similarly, a husband who does not regularly make opportunities to spend time with his wife is pushing her away.

Most important, no spouse should *ever* talk about the other spouse to anyone outside of the marriage unless they both consent to it and/or are present together. While there are exceptions where

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“A brother offended is harder to win than a strong city; and their disagreements are like the bars of a fortress.”
—Proverbs 18:19

Introduction

Repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation are central to the Bible and a Christian’s life. They are part of a chain of events that are critical to our relationship with God and each other because we all sin against God and offend one another.

While they have been the subject of many sermons and articles, there is a great deal of misunderstanding of how to properly apply them to offenses. Worst of all, there is a great reluctance to address offenses. Why are offenses so challenging? First of all, it is always hard to admit when we are wrong. This goes against our pride. No one likes to be corrected, so we become unwilling to apologize to others.

On the other hand, many times when we are offended we want “justice” for the wrong done to us. Offenses can produce anger that not only makes it hard to forgive but creates a barrier between the offender and the one who was wronged.

So how can anyone who is unwilling to repent expect others to be forgiving? Likewise, how can anyone who is in a state of anger expect others to apologize?

So there is a stalemate. The offender is either unaware of the offense or gets away with it, leaving victims hurt and angry. If the aftermath of an offense is ignored, it can affect the relationship between a Christian and God as well as the relationships between believers. These days, many victims of offenses focus on dealing with their personal emotions through “counseling” or self-help groups and books rather than following God’s instructions to resolve them.

The purpose of this booklet is to show just how serious offenses are to God and explain His ordinances for resolving them. In fact, they are so serious that unresolved offenses can be cause for both the offender *and* victim to lose out on salvation.

Chapter One

Relationships of Offender, Victim & God

When an offense occurs, there are three parties involved: the offender, the victim, and God. It is important to understand their roles as well as the responsibilities in those relationships when an offense occurs. These can involve more than one offender or victim, but, for the sake of simplicity, the discussions that follow will assume an offense occurs between two people. Therefore, the three principle relationships involved in an offense are:

- 1) The relationship between the *Offender* and *God*.
- 2) The relationship between the *Victim* and *God*.
- 3) The relationship between the *Offender* and the *Victim*.

There are not only relationships between God and each of those involved in the offense, but an equally important one between the offender and victim. However, before we can discuss these relationships, we must define some terms.

What is Sin?

What is sin? I John 3:4 says, "Sin is the transgression [violation] of the Law" (KJV). Therefore:

DEFINITION: *Sin* is a VIOLATION of God's Law.

Sin is a violation of *God's* Law because God is the Lawgiver. It says in James 4:12, "*But* there is *only one* Lawgiver." This is important to understand. Because God established the Law, all sin is *against* God. As it says in Psalm 51:4, "Against You [God], You only, have I sinned." King David said this when he repented of murdering Uriah the Hittite. Since it was Uriah the Hittite who was murdered, one might think that David sinned against him. However, sin is a *violation* of God's Law, not the *result* of the sin. In other words, David violated God's Law when he murdered Uriah the Hittite, but the result of David's sin was the death of Uriah the Hittite. Therefore, anyone who violates God's Law is a sinner in God's eyes even though the result of sin can impact someone else.

in the same way that Christ also loved the church" (Ephesians 5:25). A controlling husband is not willing to sacrifice for his wife as Jesus Christ gave us the example. Likewise, wives can be controlling of a husband, usually through manipulation by guilt ("If you loved me, you would..." or "You must not love me because you never..."). Controlling spouses suppress both *agape* and marital love in the marriage.

- 3) Spouses who talk about their problems with people outside of the marriage. It is very common for a spouse to use others, especially parents or mutual friends, to air grievances about the other. Solutions never come by complaining to others outside the marriage, but only through discussing them with the other spouse.
- 4) Spouses who are "best friends" with their children instead of being parents to them. Many do not recognize that today's standards for raising children is completely misguided. Parents should never be friends with their children because parents lose their authority. In turn, children never learn discipline and have no respect for their parents. It also means the friendship between the husband and wife is on the same level as with the children! There cannot be a proper relationship between a husband and wife unless their roles are properly established as husband and wife where *both* are parents to their children.
- 5) Spouses who put anyone or anything, whether it be children, parents, friends, career, or activities (especially with children), ahead of the emotional, mental, and physical needs of the other spouse. This is a major cause of resentment.
- 6) Spouses who criticize rather than encourage or build up the other. This prevents discussing their problems so that their relationship becomes nothing more than gripe sessions. Spouses who establish their relationship upon respect and love can discuss problems because they are not perceived as complaining but communicating the needs of one to the other.

But victims have another responsibility—not to be *easily* offended! Too many are so sensitive that they react to every small thing. How do we avoid this? First, by recognizing that God will deal with all unrepentant offenders and, second, by understanding that God will hold us accountable if we become angry without cause (Matthew 5:22).

Offenses Between Husband and Wife

Finally, let us discuss the relationship of a husband and wife, because many marriages are destroyed by *unresolved* offenses. Even if they do not lead to divorce, problems between a husband and wife are often never resolved and end up causing a lifetime of division and discord. Why? More than with any other relationship, issues in a marriage tend to compound one upon another when they are not resolved as they arise. In fact, many times they are not offenses in the beginning; but, by not addressing them, they *become* offenses.

In a marriage covenant, the responsibility to reconcile offenses is even more vital—not just for the sake of the marriage, but also for the individuals’ relationships with God. Unlike any other covenant between people, marriage is instituted by vows before God to trust, love, and care for each other in a special relationship. This relationship not only requires emotional and physical love, but also demands fully exercising godly love.

There are two main categories of offenses between a husband and wife. The first is uncommunicated expectations; in other words, one spouse expects the other to say or do things, but never actually makes it clear what they need from the other spouse. The other is caused by unhealthy emotional attachments or relationships. Some examples of both include:

- 1) Spouses who do not put God first in their lives. Each should be an example to the other of their love for, and obedience to, God. A spouse who strives to be a true child of God is highly respected and valued. Without God first in their relationship, it is open to the influences of Satan.
- 2) Spouses who are controlling. Husbands who are domineering and demanding fail to “love *their* own wives,

PRINCIPLE: All *sin* is against GOD because He is the Lawgiver.

Also, since God is the Lawgiver, He is the “Judge of all” (Hebrews 12:23). Why? As the Lawgiver, only He is qualified to judge when someone violates His Law. In Hebrews 10:30 it says, “The Lord will judge His people.”

PRINCIPLE: Only **God** can JUDGE sin because He is the Lawgiver.

Although many times we think judgment equates to punishment, forgiveness is also a judgment. This is similar to any court case in which the outcome is either conviction *or* acquittal.

PRINCIPLE: God’s **judgment** can be punishment or forgiveness.

Look at all this from a secular point of view. Communities establish laws requiring vehicles to stop for red traffic lights. When someone fails to stop, it is a crime against the community laws; that is, it is a “sin” against the community government. Why? Because it established the traffic laws. Likewise, it is the responsibility of the community to uphold those laws through officially appointed judges. The victim of a collision has no authority to pronounce judgment against someone who runs the red light. This is no different with God. As the Lawgiver, violations of His Law are sin against Him alone. When someone violates His Law, they are a sinner and He will judge them.

But what about motive? A sin can be committed intentionally or in ignorance, but any violation of God’s Law is sin. God takes the motive of the sinner into consideration when they are judged. So, motive has nothing to do with whether or not sin occurred, even though God shows mercy in judging those who repent. Any person that violates God’s Law sins against Him. Summarizing, we know:

PRINCIPLE: Any violation of God’s Law is sin **regardless** of a person’s MOTIVE.

Finally, we need to recognize that all sin has the same penalty without, or prior to, repentance. It says in Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin *is* death”; and in Ezekiel 18:20, “The soul that sins,

it shall die.” This applies to each and every violation of God’s Law, regardless of how minor the violation or whether or not the sin was intentional. Therefore:

PRINCIPLE: The *penalty* for all sin is DEATH, regardless of motive, until there is repentance and forgiveness.

Sin is a seemingly simple and obvious concept, so why make such a point of it? Because it is important to realize that sin, the violation of God’s Law, is against God alone and all sin that goes without repentance has a death penalty. So sin is a very serious matter.

But what about the victim? Doesn’t sin cause others to suffer? Yes, but now we need to understand the term *evil*. While sin is the violation of God’s Law, evil is the *consequence* of sin.

What Is Evil?

When someone sins, it is against God. However, the *result* of sin is *evil*. When David killed Uriah the Hittite, he admitted that he sinned against God; but he also said that he did *evil* to Uriah the Hittite. Notice:

PSALM 51:4 Against You, You only, have I sinned, **and done evil [to Uriah the Hittite]** in Your sight, that You might be justified when You speak and be in the right when You judge.

Who was the evil against? God? No, the evil was done to Uriah the Hittite because he was the one murdered. The phrase “done evil in Your sight” means that David’s sin caused evil to Uriah the Hittite and God saw him do it. Think about it. The sin was murder; therefore, the sin broke God’s Law. Even though it wasn’t God who was murdered, the *result* of David’s sin was the murder of Uriah the Hittite. The outcome of all sin is evil. Sometimes sin is evil against God and other times it is against people. For example, worshipping other gods is evil toward the true God whereas slander is evil to a person’s reputation. Knowing this we can say:

DEFINITION: *Evil* is the RESULT of sin.

sin. However, we must take into account the spiritual and emotional maturity of our listeners. This is also godly love. The burden of all Christians is “to whomever much has been given, from him **shall much be required**; and to whom much has been committed, **from him they will demand the more**” (Luke 12:48). Avoiding situations that can potentially become offenses is our responsibility.

It is also important to realize that if the offense was a betrayal, everything becomes more difficult. It requires more humility, love, prayer, fasting, and more time to achieve reconciliation, if it is possible. In other words, the burden of a betrayer is very heavy indeed.

One last word—be quick to recognize when an offense occurs. Many are the times that an offense arose because nothing was said when it occurred. Sometimes, a sincere apology can diffuse a situation. In Matthew 5:25 it says, “**Agree with your adversary quickly**, while you are in the way with him.” The word *agree* means to be *well-minded* toward your adversary—so it might be best to attempt to deal with the situation immediately. Otherwise, it may be that the “adversary” will brood over the matter and “there is no way that you shall come out of there until you have paid the *very last coin*” (verse 26). In other words, by waiting you may have to pay the full “price”—both in terms of time and effort—to reconcile the offense.

What If I Am the Victim?

Perhaps the biggest surprise for many has been the fact that an offense can cause the VICTIM to lose out on salvation. It usually happens because of anger that leads to bitterness, so much so that they are no longer willing to forgive the offender. Yet our eternal salvation depends upon it because God will not forgive the sins of anyone who is unforgiving to others. We must forgive the offender with the intent of reconciling as much as possible or prudent.

While we sometimes need time to overcome the hurt of an offense, an offender may also need time to admit their guilt and express their remorse for the suffering and hurt they caused. Pride affects everyone, some more than others, but we are to be long-suffering, patient, and kind with one another.

Chapter Five

What If I Am the Offender?

By now, the responsibilities of an offender should be plain. Repent to God and, in all humility, acknowledge the offense to the victim and ask for forgiveness. In all respects, have humility, remorse, and a desire to reconcile. Remember, reconciliation is, at the very least, reestablishing *agape* love and respect in the relationship.

But what if the victim is unwilling to hear or refuses to forgive? When this happens, it is not a ticket to walk away and wash our hands of the matter. In fact, it means that the situation requires additional prayer and effort. When we cause an offense, we have a responsibility to promote reconciliation where possible.

PRINCIPLE: An *offender* must always be WILLING to ask for forgiveness and to reconcile, even if the victim is unwilling to listen.

An unforgiving victim does not give the offender a free pass to give up. Many victims need time to overcome the suffering and hurt. An offender has an obligation under God's Law to seek every opportunity to show *agape* love and encourage reconciliation. However, under all circumstances, an offender must avoid obstructing or interfering with the victim's healing or making the situation worse. It is often prudent to give those who have been hurt space and time to heal. In other situations, it may be appropriate for more immediate and direct contact. Each person reacts differently so the approach requires sensitivity to the particular needs. Importantly, when we are the cause of someone else's suffering, we cannot give up even if the only option available is to continuously pray that God heals them. Causing an offense is a serious matter to God and He expects us to do everything we possibly can to reconcile, *especially* when we are the offender.

But what about when someone gets angry without cause? In other words, some will become offended over an innocent word or a matter of God's truth. Are we responsible every time someone becomes upset or angry when there was no sin? No! If we speak the truth with *agape* love and humility, then it is never a

As an example, imagine a person who wrongly charges another of a crime. First of all, the false accusation is a clear violation of the Ninth Commandment ("you shall not bear **false** witness [*false testimony*] against your neighbor"—Exodus 20:16). Who gave the Ten Commandments? God did. Therefore, the false accusation was a sin against God who is the Lawgiver. But what about the victim of the false accusation? Did the false accuser sin against the victim? No, because the Law was established by God. However, the false accusation certainly caused the victim to suffer. The result of the false testimony is *evil* because it harmed the victim. In other words, the false accusation was a sin against God because it violated His Law, but the false accusation resulted in evil against the victim who suffered as a result of the sin.

What exactly is suffering? *Suffering* is:

- Any hardship (financial loss, harm to reputation, etc.),
- Physical hurt or injury, or
- Mental or emotional pain or stress.

Evil done to people causes them to suffer. It can be immediate, such as an injury resulting from a collision between two cars, or deferred as in the case of a lie. Summarizing:

DEFINITION: *Suffering* is any hardship, physical hurt or injury, or mental or emotional pain or stress.

Returning to the example of traffic laws, imagine a case where someone runs a red light and collides with a vehicle legitimately passing through the intersection. Failure to stop at a red light is a violation of the community laws that were established to prevent collisions. It is a sin against the government, not the victim, because the victim did not establish the traffic laws. It was the community government that instituted the traffic laws and, just as important, it is the government that has legal authority to enforce those laws through the police and to impose penalties for violating those laws by the appointed judges.

However, the victim still suffered damage to the car and may be physical injury as well. By failing to stop at the red light, the lawbreaker caused the victim to suffer. In other words, the lawbreaker did evil to the victim by violating the law regardless of whether it was intentional or not. Even in the context of community laws, a violation (unless they contradict God's Law) is a

sin—although it is called a crime today. Still, the sin is only against the lawgiver; in this case the community government. However, the violation resulted in suffering for the victim through the evil consequences of the sin.

PRINCIPLE: *Evil* is the result of sin whether or not the sin was INTENTIONAL.

However, we know that the Bible clearly states that it is possible for “a brother to sin against me” (Matthew 18:21). How does that fit? Saying someone sinned against another person is a colloquialism—a common expression. For example, when two cars run into each other, we often say it was an “accident” even if one of the drivers was drunk. Obviously, a drunk driver did not “accidentally” drink too much before getting into a car and colliding with someone. A more accurate expression would be to say that the cars collided or that there was a collision. Likewise, it is more accurate to say that someone sinned *and* did evil against another person. We saw this in Psalm 51:4. However, it is common to say that someone “sinned against” another person even though it was actually evil done to the other person as a *result* of the sin. Although not technically accurate, saying someone “sinned against me” is an accepted expression. Notice:

I CORINTHIANS 8:12 Now when you sin against the brethren and wound their weak consciences in this way, you are sinning against Christ.

Notice the expression “When you sin against the brethren and wound [them].” How can sin be against both the brethren and God? It was *evil* against the brethren because it wounded their weak consciences. In other words, the result of the sin was their wounding. However, it was a violation of God’s Law, so the sin was against God. Paul clarifies this by saying it was actually a sin against *Christ*. Again, the consequences (the evil) of sin are connected with the wounding, or suffering, of others.

God’s Law is a law of *agape* love. Perfect love does no harm to anyone. Anything that hurts another person is evil, and evil results from sin that violates God’s perfect Law of love. Why is it a Law of love? Because it was established to *prevent* suffering. Therefore, harm to others is always a sin against God. Is it wrong to say that someone “sinned” against me? No, it is an acceptable

Even so, we have the *promise* of Jesus Christ to heal the broken-hearted:

ISAIAH 61:1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me because the LORD has anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor; He [God the Father] has sent Me [Jesus Christ] to bind up the broken hearted....

Asking God to heal a broken heart and remove anger and bitterness is a prayer that He *will* respect and answer. But there is one more thing that must be done: *forgive* the betrayer. This is terribly difficult, but God will again provide the means. Victims must ask God to heal their mind and heart of the betrayal so that they *can* forgive. Jesus Christ gave us the example that all things are possible through God when He asked the Father to forgive those who crucified Him.

Does this sound hard? Yes! Beyond words! In fact, the difficulty of this was not lost on the disciples. Notice what the disciples said immediately after hearing that they must forgive everyone who repents of their offenses:

LUKE 17:5 Then the apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith.”

Dealing with offenses, especially betrayals, requires *much* faith and *agape* love. Both only come from God. His love gives us the strength to bear all things, hope all things, and endure all things (I Corinthians 13:7). No one bears or endures good things. *Agape* love is the means to endure hardships and sufferings, much of which is the result of the evil caused by the sins of offenses. It is through God’s love that we are able to forgive others, including our enemies and those who betray us, because everything that is good and right comes from God. Faith gives us the means to trust in God’s promises to help us. We all live only by God’s mercy, grace, and love. Those who have been betrayed know the pain of offenses like few others—but it is through love, humility, and faith in God that they can overcome.

same way as with any offense. Most often it occurs when the victim becomes resentful, angry, and bitter—which are all barriers to forgiveness. While the initial betrayal usually produces extreme and terrible pain and heartache, these can later turn to resentment, anger, and bitterness. All of these are powerful emotions that can grieve the Holy Spirit:

EPHESIANS 4:30-31 And **grieve not the Holy Spirit of God** by which you have been sealed for *the* day of redemption. 31 Let all **bitterness, and indignation, and wrath, and clamor [cry of grief], and evil speaking [slander or blasphemy]** be removed from you, together with **all malice [desire to injure]**.

Betrayal causes such deep, heartfelt pain that grief can turn into resentment, resentment into anger, and then anger into bitterness; thus suppressing the Holy Spirit. Bitterness is consuming. It grows over time, filling the mind and heart. Eventually, it will smother the *agape* love of God. Without that, the victim might even start offending others (“malice”, in verse 31, means to have a *desire to injure*) and, if repentance is not sought, loss of salvation will result! Notice what Paul said:

HEBREWS 12:15 Looking diligently, lest anyone **fall from the grace of God**; lest any **root of bitterness springing up trouble [literally, “crowd in upon”] you, and through this many be defiled.**

Bitterness is a brooding anger, and the longer it remains the more insidious it will become—and harder to remove. It is one of the leading causes for people to “fall from the grace of God” (Galatians 5:4); so it must be avoided or removed at all costs.

While betrayal is deliberately done to someone, the harm of betrayal can only be overcome *by* the victim through God. In other words, those who have been betrayed must resist and overcome anger and bitterness. How? Through *much* fasting and *fervent* prayer “so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” from God (Hebrews 4:16).

While this is probably obvious to everyone, actually doing it is hard because the pain of a broken heart does not heal quickly and, even though healed, it may well leave an emotional scar.

expression. But for the purposes of this discussion, it is important to understand that sin is only against God’s Law—whereas the result of sin is evil because it produces suffering for others.

In modern times, people think of biblical Law as being separate from secular law so that the term *evil* has taken on a “moral” implication rather than a legal one. It used to be that people thought evil applied only to biblical laws rather than the laws established by people. But even that has changed because most people today believe evil is only equated with “bad” people rather than the result of breaking any laws. They say, “That *person* is evil.” What most people mean is that a person has a lot of hatred and intentionally causes others to suffer. However, the Bible uses the term *evil* to describe the *result* of sin.

In fact, there is a term for those who practice evil—they are *wicked*. It refers to anyone who loves to *do* evil, so it includes people and demons (II Thessalonians 3:2; I John 2:3; et al).

DEFINITION: Anyone who **practices** doing evil is WICKED.

For example, II Samuel 3:39 says, “The LORD shall reward the **doer of evil** according to **his wickedness.**” That is, God will punish according to how much someone *loves* to do evil. Satan and the demons are wicked by definition because they love to do evil.

What an Offense is NOT

Now we can begin talking about offenses, but first we need to define what is *not* an offense.

The English dictionary defines an offense as “*an annoyance or resentment brought about by a PERCEIVED insult to or disregard for oneself or one’s standards or principles.*” In the modern world, people think an offense is anything that is annoying or that they resent regardless of what was said or done. In other words, they believe an offense is anything that they disagree with or that causes bad feelings; they are perceived or imagined insults.

Today, it seems anything someone says or does will offend someone somewhere. This is plainly evident with so many people who are downright insulted every time someone disagrees with

them, especially when it comes to religion, politics, marriage, climate change, etc. From this perspective, it is impossible to avoid causing an offense.

However, as we will see in the next section, a *real* offense involves sin (transgression of God’s Law) and/or causes suffering (hardship, physical hurt or injury, or mental pain or stress). For now, it is important to understand that:

PRINCIPLE: A *real offense* involves SIN and/or causes SUFFERING to others.

Because real offenses in the Bible involve sin, they are very serious matters. However, we must be careful not to suppose that every disagreement, argument, difference of opinion, snub, insult, rebuff, rejection, etc., fall into the category of a biblical offense.

PRINCIPLE: Situations that do *not involve sin* are NOT offenses according to God.

Take, for example, the contention that arose between Paul and Barnabas over Mark (Acts 15:37-39). Whatever the cause, Paul and Barnabas parted ways—but scripture never mentions any sort of reconciliation. However, later we find they were once again united. While we do not know the details, there is no evidence that this ever reached the level of an offense involving a sin. That was just a matter of disagreement even though it was a “sharp dispute.”

We, too, must have the same perspective when it comes to offenses. When someone fails to extend a greeting, is less than friendly, says something insulting or that we take wrongly, or does not live up to our expectations, it is not an offense. Disagreements and even arguments, whether between spouses, friends, brethren, or people in general, are not necessarily offenses.

While all of these could become offenses if we allow them to, God expects us to manage our own thoughts and emotions so that we prevent these from being more than just a consequence of human shortcomings. Everyone has good and bad days, usually the result of misunderstandings, physical ailments, stressful situations, personal problems, or just the simple fact that we live in an extremely evil world controlled by Satan. Each of us will fall short from time to time. Instead of imagining the worst, we can give others space and time to deal with their problems rather than

in the heart of Judas even before he betrayed Him, He truly loved all the disciples. Knowing what Judas would do did not take away the pain of his betrayal. In fact, Judas was a *close* friend of Jesus in whom He *trusted!* Notice:

PSALM 41:9 Even a man, **my close friend [Judas Iscariot] in whom I [Jesus Christ] trusted**, who ate of my bread, **has lifted up his heel against me.**

When Judas betrayed Jesus to the priests and Levites, it was unimaginably painful. Judas not only broke the covenant bonds of trust with Jesus but also trampled on His love for him. Because of his betrayal, Jesus said it would have been better if he had *never been born*. This is even more serious than the warning in Matthew 18 where Jesus said that unrepentant offenders are better off dead. Appropriately, Judas is called a traitor (Luke 6:16). Above all other offenses, betrayal is the worst of all!

Betrayers – Repentance & Reconciliation

While there is only one “unpardonable” sin (Matthew 12:31), the burden of repentance that falls upon a betrayer is heavy. It requires the deepest sorrow, the greatest humility, and the sincerest of hearts—and can only be achieved through much fasting and many tearful prayers. Overcoming adultery or abuse of any kind requires God’s Holy Spirit, because these are truly evils of Satan the devil. Still, it is possible.

However, reconciliation with the victim or even his or her friends is difficult beyond having the minimum of godly *agape* love and respect. The victim may offer forgiveness as required by God, but the betrayer cannot expect that full restoration of the relationship is possible or prudent. There is always a price that must be paid for betrayals, so it is important to recognize that the effects can extend well beyond the victim to mutual friends, brethren, children, etc. While it is always possible to reconcile, once a covenant is broken it is the victim (and others) who will determine any future relationship with the betrayer.

Victims of Betrayal – The Temptation to Sin

Since a betrayal is the most serious type of offense, how might betrayal tempt or entice a victim to also sin? Exactly the

betrayal even if he or she sincerely repented to God. Adultery and abuse are terrible betrayals and there is a risk that the behavior might be repeated even by a converted person. In the case of abuse, a continuing and close relationship could potentially be dangerous. ***Once the bond of trust is broken by betrayal, it is all but impossible to regain it.***

There is also the question of how can the relationship ever again have deep trust and love (friendship, affection, or romantic) once betrayal has occurred? A real concern is whether or not the betrayer was capable of being in a covenant relationship. The fact of betrayal suggests an inability to have proper trust and love; otherwise, why did he or she commit the offense?

Think about it. A person who betrays God, a spouse, a friend, a brother or sister, or a child will have to spend a lot of time in prayer and fasting in order to truly repent. Betrayal is not easily repented of or forgiven. Can they repent? Certainly. How long will it take? God only knows, but it absolutely requires time. A betrayer is also usually responding to issues in their own life that were never properly dealt with before they entered into a covenant relationship. There could be problems of anger, an abusive childhood, mental problems, or many other conditions that prevent them from having the capacity for expressing proper trust, love, compassion, and kindness.

The point of all this is that serious offenses and betrayals are indicative of a dysfunctional basic emotional and/or mental condition that, at the very least, makes it unwise to expect full reconciliation with such a person. In fact, they are more in need of prayers asking God to forgive and help them than they are of full reconciliation.

Jesus Christ reminds us that betrayals are gravely serious offenses and sins. He was tempted in all points as we are and that includes betrayal. Notice what He said of Judas Iscariot, who secretly betrayed Jesus to the priests to be crucified:

MATTHEW 26:24 The Son of man indeed goes, as it has been written concerning Him, but **woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It would be better for him if that man had not been born.**

How serious is it that Judas is singled out in the Bible with a pronouncement of “woe!” upon him? While Jesus knew what was

responding in kind, assigning blame, demanding an apology, or otherwise adding “fuel to the fire.” We should recognize that these are opportunities to offer help or comfort.

What is an Offense?

So, what is a *real* offense? When it comes to the Bible, we must recognize that offenses are very serious matters with consequences to our eternal life. First of all, notice that an offense is a sin:

MATTHEW 13:41 The Son of man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom **all the offenders and those who are practicing lawlessness.** 42 And they shall cast them into the furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Offenders are in the same category as those who practice lawlessness (sin). Offenses clearly involve sin such that, without repentance, an offender could end up in the lake of fire. Therefore:

DEFINITION: All *real offenses* are SIN.

Today, almost everything someone disagrees with is considered to be an offense. This is absolutely wrong because an offense in the Bible starts with a sin, i.e., breaking God’s Law. Anything that is not a sin cannot, therefore, be an offense as far as God is concerned. Telling the truth at a criminal trial is not a sin (in fact, it is required by the Ninth Commandment), so it cannot be an offense even if the defendant gets angry when he or she is convicted by the testimony. Just because someone gets angry does not mean that it was an offense. An offense can only occur if there is a violation of God’s Law.

But what distinguishes an offense from a sin? Understanding the difference between sin and offense starts with understanding *who* is impacted by the sin. While an offense always involves a sin against God, whenever the resulting evil impacts another *person*, the sin is called an offense.

Take, for example, the Ten Commandments. The last six describe sins that involve other people. In simple terms, the last six of the Ten Commandments deal with offenses. Dishonoring parents, murder, adultery, stealing, false testimony, and coveting are

all sins. But these have evil consequences (suffering) for people, so they are offenses as well.

On the other hand, the first four of the Ten Commandments define sins that are strictly against God. While it might seem that breaking the first four commandments would be offenses to God, the Bible exclusively uses the term *sin* instead. To understand why these are not offenses, we must delve a little deeper into the biblical meaning of *offense*.

In the Greek, the noun form translated as *offense* is *skandalon*, which is the source of our English word *scandal*. It literally means a *trap*, *snare*, or *stumblingblock*. However, there is no guarantee that anyone will actually get caught in the trap or snare, or that they will stumble. The Greek word means that a trap, snare, or tripping hazard was *put in place*. Specifically, someone does *not* necessarily have to fall into it. This is further emphasized by the way it is used as a verb (*skandalizo*). It means to entrap, trip up, cause to stumble, or *entice to sin*. All of these are intended outcomes. But notice that last one—*entice to sin*. This is what an offense is all about—a temptation for someone to sin. Therefore, an offense is a *temptation* or *enticement* for someone else to sin.

DEFINITION: An *offense* is a sin against God where the resulting evil is a TEMPTATION or ENTICEMENT for the potential victim to also commit sin.

This is the reason the first four commandments are sin and *not* offenses—because God *cannot* be tempted by evil (James 1:13). However, people *can* be tempted. Notice how offenses are described in Proverbs 1:10: “My son, **if sinners entice you, do not consent.**” Solomon is saying that potential victims of an offense must resist the temptation to sin. In the case of offenses, many respond by doing the opposite—they react with anger and desire to have revenge. While offenses certainly come upon all people, we are expected to resist and avoid the temptations of sin.

But what if the potential victim avoids the temptation and does not sin. Is an offense still a sin to the offender? Yes! Why? Because all offenses start by breaking God’s Law, so offenses are always a sin regardless of how others respond. Notice:

ROMANS 14:13b, 20-21 Do not put an **occasion of stumbling or a cause of offense** before your brother.... 20 All

both to society and God, which is why Jesus Christ pronounced a “woe!” upon those who offend them (Matthew 18:6).

Beyond the offenses already mentioned, there have been cases involving some in positions of authority within the Church who have betrayed both adults and children. This has been the cause of many to “leave” the body of Christ—because they are consumed with anger and bitterness.

Betrayal also occurs among friends. Many have destroyed friendships by promoting “new truth,” being gossips, or spreading slander and false accusations.

The world is full of offenses and betrayals. It is a very sad situation. Notice what Paul says:

II TIMOTHY 3:1-5 Know this also, that in *the* last days perilous times shall come. 2 For men will be **lovers of self**, lovers of money, braggarts, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, 3 **without natural affection**, implacable, **slanderers [false accusers]**, without self-control, savage, **despisers** of those who are good, 4 **betrayers**, reckless, egotistical, **lovers of pleasure** rather than lovers of God; 5 having an outward appearance of godliness, but denying the power of *true* godliness. But *as for you*, **turn away from all these**.

Whatever the covenant, betrayal results in terrible heartache because it misused the love and affection freely given by a person. Worst of all, victims are usually innocent and unaware of the situation, at least in the beginning. The betrayer takes advantage of the victim’s trust and love usually with deceit, guile, and malice. Because of this, there is no defense against betrayal; otherwise, there would not be a bond of trust between them. Unlike a “lesser” offense, **a betrayer strikes the very heart of their victim**. The emotional pain can be quite unlike any other, too. When we trust someone, we offer our hearts and become vulnerable.

Betrayal is worse than when someone dear to us dies because we still have the memories of the trust and love for them while they lived. Instead, the betrayer shows absolute contempt and loathing for another person. There is no greater offense.

It is rarely possible or even prudent to *fully* reconcile with a betrayer. There are several reasons behind this. One serious concern is that a person might slip back into the sin that caused the

the price that is paid is always loss of a significant amount of trust. As a consequence, there is a terrible mental, emotional, and spiritual impact.

The marriage covenant between husband and wife might survive betrayal. But, even after reconciliation, the trust and love between them will never be what it once was or become what it might have been without the betrayal. Betrayals can also result in dissolution of the marriage (divorce). Adultery and abuse are the most common betrayals of the marriage covenant.

In the case of betraying the covenant with God, a repentant person could still reconcile and receive eternal life—but their works might be forfeited with a loss of reward (1 Corinthians 3:11-15).

On the other hand, betrayal can be such that the relationship is irreconcilable. Anyone who refuses to repent betrays the sacrifice of Jesus Christ given for his or her sins. This is something that God will not tolerate and is absolutely clear in Hebrews 10:

HEBREWS 10:26-27, 29-31 For **if we willfully go on sinning** after receiving the knowledge of the truth, **there is no longer any sacrifice for sins**, 27 but a terrifying **expectation of inevitable judgment and of fierce fire**, which will devour the adversaries [of God].... 29 How much worse punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has **regarded the blood of the covenant**, with which he was sanctified, **as an unholy thing**, and has scorned the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know Him Who has said, “ ‘Vengeance belongs to Me. I will recompense!’ says *the Lord*.” And again, “*The Lord will judge His people.*” 31 *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

Another common betrayal is when an adult offends a child. Because children are completely dependent upon the parents, they trust without reservation. A child develops an implicit bond of trust with the parent. Betrayal of a child usually occurs within a family in the form of physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse. However, these same offenses can involve children outside familial bloodlines. Because children are the most vulnerable members of society, betraying a child is possibly the worst of all offenses

things *that are lawful are indeed pure*; but ***it is an evil thing*** for someone to cause an occasion of stumbling. 21 It is better not to eat meat, or drink wine, or anything else by which your brother stumbles, or is offended, or is made weak.

Paul says “*it is an evil thing*” to even create an *occasion* for someone to stumble; that is, tempting others to sin is evil. It is enough to break God’s Law to cause an offense, regardless of how a victim might react. Fundamentally, an offense is a sin whether or not it was intentional *and* whether or not anyone succumbs to the temptation to sin. Therefore:

PRINCIPLE: An *offense* can still occur even if the victim AVOIDS the temptation to sin.

So why is an offense a temptation or enticement to sin? Because it can cause someone to become angry and bitter enough to be unwilling to forgive the offender (this will be discussed further in the section *Victim’s Responsibility to God*).

A very common offense is false teachings that entice brethren away from God’s truth. Another is slander or spreading gossip. This can cause us to harbor wrong thoughts and feelings toward someone we might not even know. How many times have we heard gossip about someone, only to finally get to know the person and hear quite a different story? The gossip poisons our view, and maybe even prejudices us, such that we can have evil thoughts against someone we might not even know. Worst of all, even if it was based upon fact, what if the victim has already repented? The gossip is just perpetuating the memory of it even though God has forgiven the person.

DEFINITION: The *temptation or enticement* to sin of an offense is that the victim becomes UNWILLING to forgive the offender, usually through anger.

When it comes to resisting temptations, we have the example of Jesus Christ. Notice Hebrews 4:15, “For we do not have a high priest [*Jesus Christ*] who cannot empathize with our weaknesses, but **one Who was tempted** in all things according to the likeness of our own temptations; **yet He was without sin.**”

Avoiding the usual negative emotions of anger and resentment when an offense occurs is the best way to successfully resist the temptation of an offense. The trap, snare, or stumblingblock of the offense presents every person with the choice to either avoid sin or to commit sin. Therefore, when someone causes an offense, it is up to us to recognize the temptation and choose whether or not we avoid it. How does a Christian do this? One powerful tool is prayer:

LUKE 11:4 And forgive us our sins, as we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us; and **lead us not into temptation [of offenses]**, but rescue us from the evil one.

“Evil one” can also be translated *evil*. Jesus tells us to pray to avoid the temptations of offenses. This is so vital that it should be a fundamental part of our prayers. Pray to stay alert for offenses and resist temptations because they are everywhere, including within the Church. In Matthew 18:7 it says, “Woe to the world because of offenses! For **it is necessary that offenses come.**”

So, is it possible to commit an offense without sinning? In other words, can someone cause an offense even if they are not breaking any of God’s Laws? This is where things become a little more complicated.

I CORINTHIANS 8:7-12 However, not all *have* this knowledge. But some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat *it* as a thing sacrificed to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 8 But meat does not commend us to God; for we do not have any *spiritual* advantage if we eat, nor do we come short *spiritually* if we do not eat. 9 But **beware, lest this freedom of yours becomes a stumblingblock to those who are weak.** 10 For if anyone sees you, who have knowledge, sitting to eat in an idol-temple, **will not his weak conscience be emboldened so as to cause him to eat things sacrificed to idols?** 11 And will the weak brother, for whom Christ died, perish on *account of* your knowledge? 12 Now **when you sin against the brethren and wound their weak consciences in this way, you are sinning** against Christ.

mation or steal from or otherwise harm the business. On the other hand, the employees trust their employers to pay the agreed upon wages, provide certain benefits, and ensure some measure of job security.

What distinguishes a *betrayal* from an *offense* is TRUST, which is the foundation for all covenant relationships. Furthermore, trust is built upon emotional bonds, so covenant relationships mean there is much more involved than is the case with acquaintances or strangers. An offense between people in a covenant relationship is called a *betrayal* because trust is compromised. The consequence is usually severe, emotional trauma for the victim since trust is built upon powerful feelings of friendship, affection, and/or romantic love.

One of the most common betrayals is of the marriage covenant. It can come as a result of adultery which destroys all, or at least a significant part, of the bonds of trust in the relationship.

NOTE: Adultery is not limited to a physical act but can occur when proper affection for a spouse is intentionally withheld or inappropriately directed toward another person. Affection is not just a reference to sexual love but, rather, of all forms of emotional expression including fondness, tenderness, closeness, endearment, respect, regard, admiration, etc.

Another leading cause is abuse, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual.

NOTE: Abuse of a spouse—be it physical, emotional, or spiritual—is a betrayal because the marriage covenant is established upon vows to love, cherish, and care for each other, as God intended in the marriage.

Marriage covenants produce profoundly deep emotions whether they are between people or with God. The depth is a direct reflection of the extent of the trust between them, which normally grows over time. Love develops as the trust builds, whether between people or with God. An offense that occurs in a covenant relationship is elevated to betrayal because it violates the covenant by destroying the bond of trust. This results in pain, heartache, and grief. While a marriage covenant can survive betrayal,

On the other hand, the most important covenant is with God. This is between a person who vows to trust, love, and obey God who, in return, forgives the person's sins and promises the gift of eternal life. It is formally established at baptism with the sealing of the Holy Spirit. Our relationship with God is, in fact, a marriage covenant:

II CORINTHIANS 11:2 For I [Paul] am jealous over you with *the* jealousy of God because I have **espoused you to one husband**, so that I may present *you as a chaste virgin to Christ*.

In the marriage covenant with God, the bond of trust necessarily runs deeper than any other covenant because the relationship is not just for this physical life but for all eternity.

The most common covenant is a marriage between a man and woman in which they vow to trust, love, and care for each other in a very special relationship that is only shared with each other. (Even though most marriages require a license from the government, it is their verbal pledge or vow to one another before God that is the basis for the covenant in exactly the same manner as our baptismal covenant with God.) Their relationship is based upon mutual trust that each will remain faithful, love and care for each other throughout their lives while providing for each other's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs.

When children come into a marriage, there is an unspoken covenant because they are helpless and dependent upon their parents for everything. The children trust their parents to care and provide for them. This makes the bond of trust IMPLICIT; that is, the children trust their parents because they have no choice. A close, personal friendship with someone is obviously another type of covenant because it is also based upon mutual trust and respect. Even though it may not be as formal or emotionally deep as marriage or baptism, it is still a covenant relationship. One example of this is the friendship between David and Jonathan:

I SAMUEL 18:3 And **Jonathan and David made a covenant** because **he loved him as his own soul**.

Finally, even business relationships can be a covenant, including between co-owners or between owners and employees. The owners trust that their employees will not betray company infor-

Paul describes a situation where a person who is weaker in spiritual knowledge can be tempted or enticed to sin by someone who is wiser in the Scriptures. Even though the wise believer is not breaking God's Law, the weaker brother (or sister) can sin because of his ignorance of the Scriptures. (There are sins of ignorance—refer to Leviticus 4:2, et al.) In a case such as this, the wiser believer ends up causing an offense even though it was not intentional. Again, Romans 14:21 says to avoid creating any situation whereby anyone “stumbles, or is offended, or is made weak.”

PRINCIPLE: If our *direct influence* causes someone else to sin, regardless of our motives, we *might* be the cause of an OFFENSE.

So how do we apply this in our lives? First, understand that the situation in I Corinthians 8 is dealing with two brothers in Christ. Ideally, we will always regard each other with *agape* love. Notice:

EPHESIANS 4:15-16 But **holding the truth in love**, may in all things grow up into Him Who is the Head, even Christ, 16 from Whom all the body, fitly framed and compacted together by *that which* every joint supplies, according to *its* inner working in *the* measure of each individual part, is making the increase of **the body unto *the* edifying of itself in love**.

We are to edify one another with the truth, but doing it with God's love. Does this mean we avoid speaking the truth so we do not “offend” someone? Absolutely not, but it should be done with wisdom, humility, and love.

The second point is never go to any lengths to avoid “offending” someone if it compromises our relationship with God or obedience to His Law. While the scribes and Pharisees were angry at many of the things that Jesus told them, He only spoke the truth. It is *never* a sin if someone is “offended” by our faith in God or when we speak the truth.

While it might seem that all this detail is unnecessary, look at one scripture where understanding the biblical meaning of offenses makes all the difference:

MATTHEW 18:6 But whoever shall cause one of these little ones who believe in Me to offend, it would be better for him that a millstone be hung around his neck and he be sunk in the depths of the sea.

This would not make any sense if it is read according to the strict English definition of *offend*. In other words, how could someone *cause* a child to offend? Knowing only the modern definition makes this scripture difficult to understand. However, the scripture makes sense when we understand that *offend* means to violate God's Law and tempt another to sin. This verse could be written, "Whoever shall TEMPT or ENTICE one of these little ones who believe in Me to SIN"—which makes the meaning clearer.

Another example is Matthew 24:10. The KJV translates the Greek as, "And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another." If we apply the correct meaning of *offend*, then the meaning is quite clear. Notice the correct rendering in the *Faithful Version*: "And then shall many be led into sin, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another." The phrase "led into sin" is followed by "AND shall betray one another"—which indicates that many are not just tempted or enticed to sin, they *will* sin because of offenses.

Finally, the other consequence of an offense is the potential to cause suffering. As we mentioned in the previous section, evil can hurt or harm others. So offenses not only tempt others, the sin of the offense can result in their suffering as well.

PRINCIPLE: An *offense* can cause others to SUFFER.

Understanding the biblical meaning of *offend* will be very important when we get to the section on Matthew 18. But for now, let us move on to the next topic: *repentance*.

What Is Repentance?

It is impossible to talk about forgiveness without also discussing repentance because the latter depends upon the former. In fact, repentance is *how* we receive forgiveness from God because forgiveness is not freely given to everyone who just simply says to Him, "Please forgive me" or to those that claim they are "once

Chapter Four

Betrayal – The Worst of Offenses

There is one last subject to cover—betrayal. It is important to shed some light on this subject because it gives those who have never experienced betrayal a sense of the terrible cost of it. For those who have felt the pain of it (sometimes literally), it is vital to understand the impact and how to deal with it. Lastly, betrayal is the hardest offense to reconcile, as we will see.

A betrayal is a type of offense; however, it is by far the most grievous of offenses because it takes advantage of a relationship based upon a deep bond of trust. So, before going into details let us define it:

DEFINITION: A *betrayal* is an offense against someone with whom there is a COVENANT relationship, meaning there is a bond of trust between them. Someone who betrays a covenant relationship is called a *traitor*.

Because of the covenant relationship, there is *always* a victim with betrayal. While all offenses involve other people, there is not always a real "victim." This is true when they resist the temptation to sin or there is no significant suffering as a result of the offense (although, reconciliation is still required.) But with a betrayal, there is always a victim because the bond of trust was broken.

PRINCIPLE: There is *always* a victim who SUFFERS as a result of betrayal because it breaks the bond of trust.

While a covenant can be a formal contract, for the purposes of discussing betrayal, *covenant* herein refers to any relationship between two or more people based upon *explicit* or *implicit* trust resulting from strong emotional ties. Betrayal breaks the covenant by violating those bonds of trust.

One obvious example is someone who betrays his or her own country of birth or allegiance. The relationship is based upon trust that the citizen loves his country and will not violate the loyalty to his or her country by aiding or abetting another country or enemy. Likewise, the government is trusted to ensure the citizen has certain freedoms and protections available under the laws.

the offender repents, will not have God's forgiveness of their sins and ultimately end up in the second death (the lake of fire).

PRINCIPLE: An **unforgiving** victim is at risk of the SECOND DEATH.

Repentance and forgiveness are required between people because we are commanded to reconcile with one another. Even if the relationship cannot be *fully* reconciled, we are to restore godly love between us. No one can hope to be in the Kingdom of God without a humble heart toward God *and* our brethren. Matthew 18 is the statute that applies to offenses between brethren when there is an unrepentant offender or unforgiving victim. Ideally, true Christians will reconcile their offenses without having to invoke this as a last resort. Offenses are extremely serious matters that can result in the loss of eternal life, so repentance and forgiveness are not to be taken lightly.

forgiven, always forgiven.” Because God’s forgiveness is only through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, He will not grant it lightly. While repentance is not complicated, it is a deeply emotional and spiritual response of the heart resulting from our desire to love God. Much could be said about the topic but we will only summarize the basic aspects of repentance.

DEFINITION: **Repentance** is:

- 1) Asking God to apply the precious blood of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to cover and cleanse our sin:
 - a) COLOSSIANS 1:14 In Whom we have redemption through **His own blood**, even the **remission of sins**.
 - b) ROMANS 4:7 Blessed are *those* whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose **sins are covered** [*by the blood of Jesus Christ*].
 - c) I JOHN 1:7 However, if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, *then* we have fellowship with one another, and **the blood of Jesus Christ**, His own Son, **cleanses us from all sin**.
- 2) Asking God to apply the precious broken body of Jesus Christ for the healing of the sinner’s mind and heart:
 - a) I PETER 2:24 Who Himself bore our sins within His own body on the tree, so that we, being dead to sins, may live unto righteousness; **by Whose [Jesus Christ] stripes you were healed**.
 - 1) NOTE: The body of Jesus Christ was sacrificed for our SPIRITUAL healing from sin as well as physical healing.
- 3) Deep and heartfelt sorrow for both the sin and the resulting evil:
 - a) II CORINTHIANS 7:9 And *so* I rejoice—not because you were caused to sorrow, but **because you sorrowed unto repentance**; for you sorrowed in a godly manner, so that you were not injured by us in any way.

4) A sincere, fervent, and deep desire to never sin again:

- a) II CORINTHIANS 7:10-11 For sorrow unto repentance before God works out salvation not to be repented of; but the sorrow of the world works out death. 11 For see how this very thing—your personal sorrow before God—**brought about such earnestness in you!** And, *what* a defense, and *what* indignation, and fear, and **vehement desire, and zeal, and vengeance** [*toward the sin!*]

A sinner must show God, through repentance, that he is worthy of receiving the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This is accompanied by a desire to put away sin and a renewed commitment to obeying His Law. Confessing our sins is not just obedience. We obey God's commandments *because* we have His *agape* love in us:

JOHN 14:21 **The one who has My commandments and is keeping them, that is the one who loves Me;** and the one who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will manifest Myself to him.

If we sincerely love God, then we desire above all things to obey Him and we strive to never disappoint God. It is because we love God that real repentance is a deeply emotional and spiritual response of the heart when we violate His Law.

What is Forgiveness?

For some, forgiveness is simply putting aside feelings of anger, bitterness, or guilt. Others consider it simply accepting an apology from someone for hurting them. But forgiveness is much more than that to God. Like repentance, forgiveness is not hard to understand but it is a major element of our relationship with God because it is impossible to avoid sin in this life. In fact, next to having *agape* love, forgiveness is the most important part of our relationship with God. However, we will only touch on forgiveness and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ because the Bible has much to say about it.

A victim must forgive an offender. This is the beginning of reconciliation. Now, however, a subsequent parable makes it plain what happens if the victim refuses to forgive:

MATTHEW 18:23-35 Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is compared to a man, a *certain* king, who would take account with his servants. 24 And after he began to reckon, there was brought to him one debtor who owed *him* ten thousand talents. 25 But since he did not have *anything* to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 Because of this, the servant fell down *and* worshiped him, saying, "Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you all." 27 And being moved with compassion, the lord of that servant released him, and forgave him the debt. 28 Then that servant went out *and* found one of his fellow servants, who owed him a hundred silver coins; and after seizing him, he choked *him*, saying, "Pay me what you owe." 29 As a result, his fellow servant fell down at his feet and pleaded with him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." 30 But he would not *listen*; instead, he went and cast him into prison, until he should pay the amount that he owed. 31 Now when his fellow servants saw the things *that* had taken place, they were greatly distressed; and they went to their lord *and* related all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord called him *and* said to him, "*You* wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt, because you implored me. 33 **Were you not also obligated to have compassion on your fellow servant, even as I had compassion on you?**" 34 And in anger, his lord delivered him up to the tormentors, until he should pay all that he owed to him. 35 **Likewise shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother's offenses from the heart.**

This is an account about someone who was forgiven a huge debt by a king but turns around and refuses to forgive a much smaller debt owed to him by his fellow servant. The king's response was to deliver the man to the torturers "until he should pay all that he **owed** to [the king]." What does every sinner owe God? Their life! Anyone who withholds forgiveness, especially when

ROMANS 16:17 Now I exhort you, brethren, to **take note of those who are causing** divisions and **offenses** contrary to the doctrine which you have learned, **and shun them**.

Those who cause offenses and do not repent are obviously not serving Jesus Christ and the Church. Worse yet, they are causing dissensions and divisions within the body of Christ. Such unrepentant offenders are to be shunned and avoided, i.e. disfellowshipped.

PRINCIPLE: If an offender is unrepentant and found to be causing dissention and division, the *judgment* of the Church is to take note of the person and SHUN him or her.

Furthermore, an offender must also understand that the penalty for sin is death unless there is repentance.

PRINCIPLE: An *unrepentant* offender is at risk of the SECOND DEATH.

If an offender later shows fruits of true repentance, he or she must be forgiven and welcomed back into the sheepfold. Again, the motive of all those involved in judging an offense is to “gain” back a brother or sister to God.

Part 3: The Unforgiving Victim (Matt. 18:21-35)

Now the focus of Matthew 18 changes from an unrepentant offender to an unforgiving victim. Read the next two verses:

MATTHEW 18:21-22 Then Peter came to Him *and* said, “Lord, **how often shall my brother sin [and cause evil] against me and I forgive him [the offender]**? Until seven times?” 22 Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you until seven times, but until seventy times seven.”

Here Peter asks a reasonable question—how often are we to forgive an offender? The answer is *every* time the offender truly repents. Luke makes this even clearer:

LUKE 17:3-4 Watch yourselves; and if your brother commits a sin against you, rebuke him; and **if he repents, forgive him [the offender]**. 4 And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.

The Greek word for *forgive* means to *send away guilt*. This simple statement encapsulates the purpose of seeking God’s forgiveness for sin. We can summarize it as:

DEFINITION: *Forgiveness* is:

- 1) God covering (atoning) the sin by the blood of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice:
 - a) ROMANS 4:7 Blessed are *those* whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose **sins are covered**.
- 2) God cleansing the heart and mind of the sinner from the lust that led to the sin by the blood of Jesus Christ:
 - a) I JOHN 1:9 If we confess our own sins, He is faithful and righteous, to forgive us our sins, and to **cleanse us from all unrighteousness**.
- 3) God healing the heart and mind of the sinner of the sin by the broken body of Jesus Christ.
 - a) PSALM 41:4 I said, “LORD, be gracious unto me; **heal my soul, for I have sinned** against You.”
- 4) God releasing the sinner (lawbreaker) from the penalty for sin (death):
 - a) COLOSSIANS 2:13 For you, who were *once* dead in *your* sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has *now* made alive with Him, **having forgiven all your trespasses**.
 - b) I PETER 2:24 Who Himself [*Jesus Christ*] bore our sins within His own body on the tree, so that **we, being dead to sins, may live** unto righteousness.

In the same way that sin is only *against* God, forgiveness is likewise only *from* God.

Chapter Two

Offender's Responsibility to God

With the important terms now defined, we can discuss the relationships of those involved with an offense. The first of these involves the offender and God. An offense always involves a violation of God's Law; that is, a sin. Because forgiveness for sin only comes from God and is only granted upon repentance on the part of the offender, it is the responsibility of the offender to reach out to God in prayer—and sometimes fasting as well. This kind of prayer is generally referred to as a *supplication*. We realize that our sin has separated us from God and that we have incurred the death penalty; so we plead with God to be merciful and forgiving. Imagine a young boy who disobeys his parents. Upon seeing the displeasure or anger on the faces of his parents, the little boy breaks down in tears just from knowing how much he disappointed them. When someone sins, true repentance will be reflected in the heart in much the same way as the little boy. The offender will come to God quickly and beg for forgiveness.

In fact, the biblical meaning of *supplication* is to “*entreat* someone for a favor by offering an olive branch.” This is why fasting is quite often one of the responses of an offender, because it is a reflection of a humble and contrite heart that shows God a sincere desire to be forgiven. A humble and contrite heart (Isaiah 57:15) is the first step in repenting of an offense.

Upon hearing the offender's prayer of repentance, God, in His love, mercy, and grace, grants forgiveness. But God does not just simply say, “Okay, you are forgiven.” Forgiveness requires the blood of Jesus Christ to cover the sin and cleanse the offender, as well as applying His broken body for healing the offender. The sacrifice of His Son is precious to God and will not be applied frivolously. In some cases, cleansing and healing of the heart and mind takes time and may require additional fasting and prayer to complete the process—but God's forgiveness is absolute and complete.

Once the offender repents and God grants forgiveness, the relationship between them is restored; that is, *reconciled*. As it says, “**repent** and be converted **in order that your sins may be**

Whatever judgment is rendered by the Church is bound or loosed in heaven as long as it is done according to God's Law and they are gathered together in His name.

PRINCIPLE: The *third step* in dealing with an unrepentant offender is to bring the matter before those in the Church who are able to judge the matter.

Given that the reason to involve others in the Church is for judgment, does that mean the entire body of Christ needs to hear the matter? No! *The matter should be brought before only those necessary and able to render a judgment.*

PRINCIPLE: Any offense that is brought before the Church should only include the victim(s), the one or two additional witnesses, and at least one converted man capable of judging the matter.

A judge might be an elder but he is not required to be one. It could involve more than one judge and, perhaps, others that *need* to know (as determined by the nature and extent of the offense), but no more. It is brought to the Church with the hope that the offender will yet repent; therefore, those selected to hear the matter are only the victims, witnesses, and judges. Any more than that and the hearing may not be being conducted decently and in order (I Corinthians 14:40). This is important. Again, the desire is always to “gain” back the brother or sister in Christ.

The sincere desire of those involved in judging an offense must be that the offender repent. Otherwise, the hearing becomes strictly a matter of vengeance or condemnation. That prerogative falls under the authority of God alone. If the offender still refuses to repent, only then is the judgment rendered:

MATTHEW 18:17 And if he [*the offender*] fails to listen to [*hear*] them, tell *it* to the church. But if he also fails to **listen to the church, let him be to you as the heathen and the tax collector.**

The Jews traditionally considered the heathen and tax collector (*publicans* in the KJV) as undesirables. But what does that mean? Paul sums up what the Church must do with unrepentant offenders:

reconciling. What is the most important characteristic of those involved in dealing with an offense? Humility. How are we to be toward one another? Loving and forgiving, because God has forgiven our sins. Therefore, we will desire the offender to repent and do our best to encourage it.

Understanding *who* of the Church should be involved can be seen by knowing *why* the Church is involved. In this case, the matter is brought before the Church for judgment! Notice the situation in Corinth:

I CORINTHIANS 6:1-5 Does **anyone among you who has a matter against another** dare to go to a court of law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? 2 Don't you know that the **saints shall judge the world**? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you unworthy of the most trivial of judgments? 3 Don't you know that we shall judge angels? **How much more then the things of this life?** 4 So then, **if you have judgments concerning the things of this life, why do you appoint as judges those who have no standing in the church?** 5 Now I say *this* to your shame. *Is it* because there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who is able to decide between his brothers?

Paul was disappointed that the Corinthians were not dealing with an offense properly. He said that by this time there should be men among them capable of judging matters between brethren. When witnesses bring a matter to the Church, it is for the purpose of establishing a judgment by wise, converted, and humble Christians. This is confirmed in the next three verses:

MATTHEW 18:18-20 Truly I say to you, **whatever you shall bind on the earth** will have already been bound in heaven; and **whatever you shall loose on the earth** will have already been loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, that **if two of you on earth shall agree concerning any matter** that they wish to request, it shall be done for them by My Father, Who is in heaven. 20 For where **two or three [witnesses] are gathered together** in My name, there, I am in *the* midst of them.

blotted out" (Acts 3:19). God completely removes our sins so that we are reconciled to Him:

COLOSSIANS 1:20-21 And, having made peace through the blood of His cross, **by Him [Jesus Christ] to reconcile all things to Himself**; by Him, whether the things on the earth, or the things in heaven. 21 For you were once alienated and enemies in *your* minds by wicked works; but **now He has reconciled you**.

The word *reconcile* used here is unique and specific to our relationship with God. It is from two independent Greek words meaning to *fully reconcile*. Full reconciliation is only possible with God because only He is capable of removing our transgressions "as far as the east is from the west" (Psalm 103:12).

DEFINITION: **Full reconciliation** is ALWAYS possible with God.

With God, forgiveness is absolute and total. He does not remember our sins once He grants forgiveness (Jeremiah 31:34). In other words, there are no encumbrances between us and God when He forgives our sins. So God's forgiveness *fully* reconciles us.

While full reconciliation with God is always possible, this is not necessarily the case with people. We all have the "law of sin and death" within us and some offenses are worse than others. Because of this, there are some offenses where full reconciliation is not always possible or prudent. More on this later.

Victim's Responsibility to God

Now let us look at the responsibility of the victim to God that results from an offense.

When an offense occurs, it may be surprising to know that the victim also has a responsibility to God. Notice:

MATTHEW 6:14-15 For **if you forgive men their trespasses [offenses], your heavenly Father will also forgive you [for your sins]**. 15 But **if you do not forgive men their trespasses [offenses], neither will your Father forgive your trespasses [sins]**.

These scriptures (see also Mark 11:26 and Luke 6:37) emphatically state that the victim of an offense *must* forgive the offender. If we do not forgive the offenses of others, God says He will *not* forgive our sins. Scripture is very clear about this, but how many take this seriously? How often have we gone to God with sincere, heartfelt repentance for a sin we have committed and not even given it a second thought that we have refused to forgive someone who offended us? It is a serious matter indeed to contemplate that forgiveness for our sins is refused by God because we have not forgiven someone else.

PRINCIPLE: God will *not* forgive the sins of a victim if he or she is UNWILLING to forgive the offender.

Forgiving others is hard. It absolutely requires God's love in us. It requires humility to sincerely forgive someone who offends us.

ISAIAH 57:15 For thus says the high and lofty One Who inhabits eternity; Whose name is Holy; "I dwell in the high and holy place, even **with the one who is of a contrite and humble spirit**, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

Agape love and humility are not natural to mankind, but they are essential for true Christians because we are to love one another as well as our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

I JOHN 3:11, 14-15 For this is the message that you heard from *the* beginning—that **we should love one another**: ... 14 We know that we have passed from death into life because **we love the brethren**. The one who does not love *his* brother is dwelling in death. 15 **Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer**, and you know that no murderer has eternal life dwelling within him.

So, again, what is our responsibility to God when an offense occurs? To have *agape* love and humility so that we are WILLING to forgive those who offend us.

PRINCIPLE: God *requires* a victim to at least be WILLING to forgive an offender.

DEUTERONOMY 17:6 At the mouth of **two witnesses or three witnesses** shall he that is worthy of death **be put to death**. At the mouth of **one witness he shall not be put to death**.

Remember that an offense can be such a grievous sin that Jesus said "woe!" unto anyone who offends. Therefore, in this circumstance, the offender may now be in danger of the death penalty unless he or she repents (Matthew 18:8-9), so two or three witnesses are required. In verse 16, these witnesses should be a clear signal to the offender that the matter is being established on legal grounds.

PRINCIPLE: The *second step* in dealing with an unpentant offender is for the victim and one or two others to speak with the offender. At this point, they are all WITNESSES.

Their testimony to the offender regarding the offense establishes the situation legally under the Law of God. If the offender *hears* them (by repenting at some point), then the brother or sister is "gained" and the situation resolved. However, if not, the third step is to bring the matter to the Church; that is, the *ekklesia*:

MATTHEW 18:17 And if he [*the offender*] fails to listen to [*hear*] them, **tell it to the church**. But if he also fails to listen to the church, let him be to you as the heathen and the tax collector.

Now the matter is brought to the attention of the Church. Many have mistakenly thought that "the church" means to tell it to an ordained elder. While an elder is a member of the Church, the Church does not consist solely of elders. The Church is the body of Christ, so it includes all baptized members.

Who would that include? Today, we have the means to contact every single member of the Church in the world; but is that what was intended? No! Remember, the initial meeting was a private one. This is important because privacy gives the offender the best opportunity to repent in the presence of one, or a few, humble fellow saints rather than in front of a large group. It is important to keep the matter private because public knowledge of the sin could potentially hinder the offender from repenting and

DEFINITION: To *hear* means to LISTEN and OBEY. It requires listening to, understanding, and then acting on what is said.

An offender must truly listen and be willing to accept a rebuke. The words may not be pleasant or comfortable, but God expects us to listen to and hear one another especially when it comes to the serious matter of offenses. Finally, the offender must repent.

The next part of the process deals with an offender who refuses to listen to the victim:

MATTHEW 18:16 But if he [*the offender*] will not listen [*hear*], take with you one or two others, so that in *the* mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

When the first attempt at talking to the offender fails, the victim is now required to bring one or two others along and, again, try to talk with the offender.

Notice that it says “ONE or TWO others, so that in the mouth of TWO or THREE witnesses.” This means the victim and the “one or two others” are now all *witnesses*. At this point, the offender is being subjected to a very specific legal process. The last half of verse 16 is a quote from a statute (commandment) in the Old Testament:

DEUTERONOMY 19:15 One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sins. At the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be made sure.

Witnesses are an important part of God’s judicial system because they provide legal testimony that establishes the truth of any matter brought before a judge. In fact, they were still required at the time of the disciples (Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; et al). They are vital to establishing truth. This is why God requires them for all judgments, on earth as well as in heaven, including the final judgment (Matthew 12:36). Witnesses were particularly important in death penalty cases:

This is also how we avoid the temptations and enticements to sin when an offense occurs. What is the temptation or enticement to sin? Most often through anger. This can lead to our being *unwilling* to forgive. Since God forgives us only as we forgive others, this can be the biggest threat to our eternal lives.

DEFINITION: The *temptation or enticement* to sin of an offense is because the victim becomes UNWILLING to forgive the offender, many times through anger.

Forgiveness also means that a Christian accepts repentance from an offender. Someone who stays angry can even be the cause of a situation or environment that prevents the offender from repenting. This can happen if we think or say evil things or by deliberately shunning the offender. Again, sustained anger is a major barrier to forgiveness.

Think about it. If an offender comes to us and repents, would we be able to sincerely and humbly forgive them if we are still angry? No! Would we be showing *agape* love to the person? No! This kind of anger puts us in a very dangerous spiritual condition because God says He will not forgive our sins if we do not forgive those who offend us and accept their repentance.

PRINCIPLE: *Refusing* to forgive an offender is a SIN.

This is why *agape* love and humility are foundational to forgiving others—because we, like any offender, are sinners who require God’s forgiveness. Therefore, God commands us to show love to both our brethren *and* our enemies:

LUKE 6:31-37 And exactly as you would have men do to you, you do the same to them also. ... 35 But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and you shall be *the* children of the Highest; for He is good to the unthankful and *the* wicked. 36 Therefore, you also be compassionate, even as your Father is compassionate. 37 And do not judge *others*, so that you yourself will not be judged in any way. Do not condemn *others*, so that you will not be condemned in any way. Forgive, and you shall be forgiven.

God loved us when we were sinners, and He expects His children to extend the same willingness to forgive as He does to us. In fact, it does not matter if the offender repents at all. Our duty is to be *willing* to forgive whether or not an offender repents. So does God expect us to never be angry? No, but God is merciful to help us work through it. Through prayer we can have the *agape* love and humility to be able to forgive those who offend us. Notice the focus on offenses when Jesus taught the disciples how to pray:

MATTHEW 6:12-13 And forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors [*indebted by an offense*]. 13 And lead us not into temptation [*of offenses*], but rescue us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

When we pray and ask God to forgive us, we are to remember that we must “also forgive our debtors”; that is, be mindful that God forgives our sins only as we forgive those of others.

So, what about us? Can we forgive those who offend us? What do we think or do that prevents us from forgiving others? Perhaps we wrongly assume that an offender does not want to repent and, in doing so, we put up barriers against him or her. Or, maybe, deep down we are secretly hoping that the offender refuses to repent. We must examine our motives and assumptions to ensure our carnal nature is not standing in the way of forgiving someone. Or, what if someone refuses to repent? Would that also prevent us from forgiving them? Can we still be willing to forgive?

In the end, it is *our* choice. Are we humble and contrite? The love of God in our hearts is reflected in our willingness to forgive others. In this life we are constantly fighting our own sins and the offenses of others to stay *fully reconciled* with God. It can be terribly difficult and requires tremendous effort. Our eternal lives are at stake, so it is vital that we forgive anyone who offends us. Those who are unforgiving will not be in the Kingdom of God.

Responsibilities of the Offender & Victim

Perhaps the most difficult relationship is the one between an offender and a victim. Offenses can cause a rift in the relationship

Jesus sets the stage by describing a situation where a brother in Christ causes an offense but refuses to repent (otherwise, the matter would have already been resolved). The first duty is for the victim to *privately* tell the offender of his or her fault. If the offender had already repented, then this would not be necessary. This ensures the offender is aware that offense occurred.

PRINCIPLE: The *first step* in dealing with an unrepentant offender is for the victim to PRIVATELY TELL the offender of the offense.

The word *fault* can be confusing. It does not mean *sin* but is actually a verb that means to *admonish, reprove, rebuke, or convict*. This verse is the only place it was translated *fault* out of the sixteen other places it is used in the Bible. In every other scripture, it is used for rebuking or admonishing someone. For example, in II Timothy 4:2 it says, “Preach the Word! Be urgent in season and out of season; **convict [admonish]**, rebuke, encourage, with all patience and doctrine.” Here, the word *convict* is the same as *fault*. Therefore, we could render Matthew 18:15 as, “So then, if your brother offends you, go and **rebuke or admonish him** privately. If he is willing to hear you, you have gained your brother.” Luke also clearly confirms that *fault* is an act of rebuking or admonishing the offender for the offense:

LUKE 17:3 Watch yourselves; and if your brother commits a sin against you, **rebuke** him....

Now, take a look at the word *sin* in verse 15. It is actually the same word used in Matthew 27:4 by Judas who said of his betrayal of Jesus, “I have **sinned** and have betrayed innocent blood.” Therefore, Matthew 18:15 is dealing with an offense that is truly a sin or violation of God’s Law. It is not a simple misunderstanding or minor argument. Real offenses are sins; as such, the offender is in peril of the second death unless they repent. We know this to be true because he needs to be “gained” back; that is, reconciled to God and restored as a brother or sister in Christ (verse 15).

Finally, the word *hear* in Matthew 18:15 (“if [*the offender*] is willing to **hear** you”) has a much deeper implication in the Greek than in English. It is hearing in the sense of listening to what is said, understanding what is said, and then acting on what is said:

In no uncertain terms, Jesus said that whoever causes an offense and does not repent will end up in the lake of fire.

DEFINITION: A *woe* (Greek *ouai*) is a pronouncement of a judgment to ETERNAL DEATH (the lake of Gehenna fire) and a grave warning to repent.

But why are offenses so grievous? Read on:

MATTHEW 18:10-14 Take heed *that* you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that their angels in heaven continually look upon the face of My Father, Who is in heaven. 11 For the **Son of man has come to save those who are lost**. 12 What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, *does he* not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and search for the one that went astray? 13 And if he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. 14 Likewise, **it is not *the will of your Father Who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish***.

The reason offenses are so serious is plain: they may cause someone to lose eternal life. Anyone who perishes because of an offense on our part puts us in grave danger of the second death unless we truly repent “with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning” (Joel 2:12).

Part 2: The Unrepentant Offender (Matt. 18:15-20)

There are only two possible responses a person can have when they commit an offense: either they repent or they do not. This next part of Matthew 18 is focused on the case where an offender refuses to repent. It describes the roles and responsibilities of the victim and the Church and then ends with instructions on dealing with the unrepentant offender.

MATTHEW 18:15 So then, if your brother sins against you, **go and show him his fault between you and him alone [that is, privately]**. If he is willing to hear you, **you have gained your brother**.

between people. Restoring the broken relationship is called *reconciliation*. Notice:

MATTHEW 5:23-24 For this reason, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that **your brother has something against you**, 24 leave your gift there before the altar, and go *your way*; **first be reconciled with your brother**, and then come and offer your gift.

Here is a case where a brother (or sister) in Christ was offended because he has something *against* the person offering the gift. Jesus said it is the responsibility of the believing offender to go to his brother and be reconciled. So what is reconciliation?

DEFINITION: *Reconciliation* is restoring a broken relationship between people or between a person and God.

But how does reconciliation occur between people? Is it different from the *full* reconciliation between people and God? Many assume that reconciliation fully restores a relationship physically, mentally, and emotionally to the way it was prior to the offense. However, that is not always possible or prudent in the case with people because it is dependent upon the nature and seriousness of the offense.

For example, serious offenses, such as adultery or spousal abuse, can permanently alter a relationship and can be a legitimate reason for divorce even in marriages between converted people. Even when there is repentance, it is not unusual for there to be deep wounds that take a long time to heal. Furthermore, in some cases there are behavioral patterns that are cause for concern. This means that full restoration of the physical, mental, and emotional relationship is not always possible, or even prudent, between people—unlike with God.

However, other offenses—such as gossip, hurt feelings, disagreements, false accusations, and jealousies—might be resolved so that a relationship is fully restored. So, what does God expect when people try to reconcile with one another? At a minimum, we are to restore *agape* love one to another:

I JOHN 3:23 And this is His commandment: that we believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and that **we *lagape*/ love one another**, exactly **as He gave commandment** to us.

Jesus Christ commanded us to love one another even as He loves us (John 15:12). What is *agape* love? It is one of the most misunderstood terms in the Bible because the English word *love* only refers to an emotional feeling for someone. In fact, most of the time it is used as a noun, whereas *agape* love is *always* a verb in the sense of showing or giving love. In other words, the Greek word *agape* is less about feelings and more about doing. Notice how Paul defines *agape* love:

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7 [Agape love] is patient [longsuffering or forbearing] and is kind [well-meaning]; [agape love] envies not, does not brag about itself, is not puffed up. 5 [Agape love] does not behave disgracefully, does not seek its own things, is not easily provoked, thinks no evil, 6 does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth. 7 [Agape love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

As mentioned several times, *agape* love is the foundation of reconciliation between us and God as well as between people. The problem with reconciliation between people is that the relationship may not be able to be fully restored, as it can be with God. However, God commands us to show *agape* love to one another in spite of our differences. Therefore:

DEFINITION: Reconciliation between people is, at a minimum, restoring *agape* love among them.

On the surface this can be hard to accept because many misunderstand the meaning and intent of *agape* love. How did Paul define it? He said *agape* love is:

- 1) Forbearing with one another (long-suffering),
- 2) Intending to do good to others (kindhearted),
- 3) Not envious (generous),
- 4) Not boastful (humble),
- 5) Not prideful (meek),
- 6) Not behaving disgracefully (acting decently),
- 7) Not being selfish (giving),
- 8) Not easily provoked (patient),
- 9) Not thinking evil (righteous),
- 10) Not rejoicing in iniquity (just).
- 11) Rejoices in the truth (truthful).

men, and **took the form of a servant**; 8 and being found in *the* manner of man, **He humbled Himself**, and became obedient **unto death, even the death of the cross**.

So, Jesus leads into the subject of offenses by establishing humility as the core element in dealing with the disciples. Without it, He said, we will not even be *in* the Kingdom.

PRINCIPLE: Humility is foundational to reconciling OFFENSES.

After showing them their lack of humility, Jesus then warned the disciples of the consequences of offenses:

MATTHEW 18:5-7 And whoever shall receive one such little child in My name receives Me. 6 But **whoever shall cause one of these little ones who believe [trust] in Me to offend**, it would be better for him that a millstone be hung around his neck and he be sunk in the depths of the sea. 7 **Woe** to the world **because of offenses!** For it is necessary that offenses come, yet **woe to that man by whom the offense comes!**

Beginning here, Jesus addresses the serious nature of offenses. Continuing to use the child as an example, Jesus said that anyone who offends a little child that believes and trusts in Him would be better off dead. Jesus then pronounced a *woe* upon all unrepentant offenders. Let this sink in: *it is better to be dead than offend a believer* (unless they repent).

In the Bible, a *woe* (Greek *ouai*) is the pronouncement of a pending judgment of death (as in the three “woes” of Revelation). Can there be any more somber warning? Notice Jesus’ emphasis in the next two verses:

MATTHEW 18:8-9 And if your hand or your foot causes you to offend, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to offend, pluck it out and throw it away; for it is better for you to enter into life one-eyed than to have two eyes and be **cast into the fire of Gehenna**.

The Greek word for *greatest* means *larger*, especially in age. An example of this word is in Romans 9:12 where the same word is translated *elder*, meaning *older*. Unlike modern times, people had great respect for their elders, especially older men, because they were expected to be wise leaders and just judges in the community.

The disciples were infected with sinful pride, so they argued for supremacy over one another in the Kingdom. Obviously, all of this changed after their conversion.

Oddly enough, in response to their question, Jesus calls over a little child. The child is very young and, as such, humble, obedient, and respectful of the adults—the antithesis of the prideful disciples.

MATTHEW 18:2-4 And after calling a little child to Him, Jesus set him in their midst, 3 and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, there is no way that you shall enter into the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore, whoever shall humble himself as this little child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

After picking up the little child (Luke 9:47), Jesus told the disciples that they would *not* enter into the Kingdom unless they are converted and become as the little child. This must have shocked the disciples who likely assumed their positions in the Kingdom were assured. Furthermore, the concept that power and authority are given to those who are humble was foreign to their thinking. Jesus was obviously addressing the motive behind their question—pride. They were filled with it and blinded even to the humility required of Jesus Christ to become flesh and die for the sins of mankind:

PHILIPPIANS 2:3-8 Let nothing *be* done through contention or vainglory, but in humility, each esteeming the others above himself. 4 Let each one look not *only* after his own things, but *let* each one also *consider* the things of others. 5 Let this mind be in you, which *was* also in Christ Jesus; 6 Who, although He existed in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but emptied Himself, and was made in the likeness of

If *agape* love is all these things, can we show love regardless of whatever offenses come our way? Yes! Can a repentant offender show love toward those who were hurt? Yes! *Agape* love does not require anything in return. It simply desires to serve and obey God while doing good for others. In fact, *agape* love can be demonstrated even when someone is absent. How? One way is by not talking about the problems and sins of others. Instead, we can pray for them (Matthew 5:44).

DEFINITION: *Agape* love is an unconditional, wholehearted desire to serve and obey God the Father and Jesus Christ. It is also a discipline of thoughts and emotions to do good for others without expecting anything in return. *Agape* love is long-suffering, kindhearted, generous, humble, meek, behaving decently, giving, patient, righteous, just, and truthful (I Corinthians 13:4-7).

This is in complete contrast to the selfish so-called love of many in the world. But why is reconciliation restoring *agape* love toward one another? Because the primary purpose of reconciliation is to reestablish a relationship with a brother or sister after it has been damaged by an offense. While all parties involved in an offense need to deal with their personal sins, there is more to it than that. We need to reconcile with each other at least to the extent that we are *all members of the body of Christ* (I Corinthians 12:27). Notice this particular scripture:

MATTHEW 18:15 So then, if your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault between you and him alone. If he is willing to hear you, you have gained your brother.

The word *gained* is used in the sense of “winning a convert” back to God. When there is reconciliation, the victim has “gained” the offender back as a spiritual brother or sister, indicating that the offender is also reconciled to God through repentance. This word is also used by Paul:

I CORINTHIANS 9:19-22 For although I am not under bondage to anyone, I have made myself a servant to all, so that I might gain the more. 20 Now to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to those who

are under law, as under law, **that I might gain those who are under law**; 21 to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law to God, but within law to Christ), **that I might gain those who are without law**. 22 To the weak, I became as weak, **that I might gain those who are weak**. To all these, I have become all things, so **that I might by all means save some**.

The word *gain* is used in the sense that Paul might “save some” (verse 22). So reconciliation between people is about restoring the relationship between people—as well as their relationship with God that was compromised by the sin of the offense.

DEFINITION: To *gain* a brother or sister means to restore the relationship between people, as well as with God.

This is also described in Galatians 6:1: “Brethren, even if a man be overtaken in some offense, you who are spiritual, **restore** such a one in a spirit of meekness....” Here, *restore* means to help the offender reestablish his or her spiritual relationship with God and with others. This is showing *agape* love to the other person, which is how reconciliation occurs.

So, what is required for reconciliation between people? Exactly the same things as required for reconciliation between us and God—repentance and forgiveness. Notice:

LUKE 17:3-4 Watch yourselves; and if your brother commits a sin against you, rebuke him; and **if he repents, forgive him**. 4 And if he sins against you seven times in a day, **and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him**.

An offender must repent to the victim—who must, in turn, forgive the offender. This is not a suggestion; it is a commandment from Jesus Christ. However, it is contingent upon the offender’s repentance, because in verse 3 it says, “If he repents.”

PRINCIPLE: If the offender *repents*, the victim must FORGIVE the offender.

If only God can forgive sin, what does this mean? Think of it as the offender saying with *all* humility, “I regret the suffering I caused and desire to have peace between us”—and the victim

Chapter Three

Prologue to Matthew 18

You may have wondered after all the discussion to this point why very little has been said about Matthew 18. First, understand that it is a statute of God that applies only to those who are part of the body of Christ. As such, it is the law that deals with unresolved offenses. Additionally, it is a grave warning to anyone who refuses to try to reconcile with a brother or sister in Christ.

Those who are truly converted will humbly and sincerely seek to reconcile with each other at least to the extent that *agape* love is restored between them as we discussed before. When people reconcile offenses, Matthew 18 becomes unnecessary.

PRINCIPLE: Matthew 18 only applies to *converted* Christians and is a LAST RESORT for dealing with an unresolved offense.

When offenses are not reconciled, Matthew 18 is the applicable statute because it is focused on two situations: 1) how the victim and Church deal with an unrepentant offender and, 2) how God deals with an unforgiving victim.

Part 1: Nature of Offenses (Matt. 18:1-15)

Matthew 18 sets the stage for dealing with unresolved offenses by introducing the serious nature of such offenses—and it does so in an unusual way.

MATTHEW 18:1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

It starts with a question from the disciples of who would be the greatest *in the Kingdom*. The disciples were lusting for power and authority over each other as well as over all of God’s future family. This would come up more than once (even during Passover—Matthew 20:20-24) because it was a serious offense between them (Luke 22:24).

All who would enter into the Kingdom of God must endure suffering. It is all part of this life for the begotten children of God! Until God calls those of the world, there will be times we must suffer their evil without responding in kind or expecting reconciliation. Jesus Himself set us an example:

I PETER 2:23 Who, **when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when suffering, He threatened not**, but committed *Himself* to Him Who judges righteously.

Jesus did not retaliate when He was vilified (reviled) but suffered the evil of His enemies because it is the desire of God to save them at a later time. We cannot expect to deal with unconverted people in the same manner as a true Christian. Instead, we must do all that is prudent and possible to resolve the situation and make peace. In these cases, a believer is sometimes limited to repenting to God if they caused offense or just being willing to forgive. Beyond that, we cannot expect unconverted people to know, much less obey, God's statutes in dealing with offenses.

saying to the offender with *all* humility, "I accept your apology and am willing to reestablish peace between us." This is a vital exchange. This is what sets the foundation for reconciliation; but it must be done with humility, as will be evident in their sincerity.

PRINCIPLE: *Reconciliation* requires the offender to RE-PENT (acknowledge the evil of their sin) and the victim to FORGIVE (accept the offender's repentance).

Ideally, both parties will spend time in prayer to God before they attempt to reconcile with each other. This helps prepare them spiritually so that they can show each other humility and godly love.

So what happens when the offense cannot be resolved? If the offender refuses to repent, the victim only has the responsibility to be *willing* to forgive the person. Likewise, if the victim refuses to forgive, the offender can only be *willing* to repent. However, without repentance or forgiveness, reconciliation is not possible.

PRINCIPLE: *Reconciliation between people* can only occur when there is both REPENTANCE and FORGIVENESS.

Such is common in the world today. It is rare that someone, even in the Church, will apologize anymore. The irony is that the world is constantly preaching "tolerance" but is unwilling to say, "I'm sorry."

Now we need to clarify another aspect of reconciliation. It is not always possible, or even prudent, to *fully* reconcile the relationship between people for every offense. For example, reconciliation does not mean that a relationship should continue between a husband and wife after adultery or abuse (although it might). It is not appropriate for further contact in the case of rape, and a child molester should never be allowed to associate with children.

PRINCIPLE: *Serious offenses* may, of necessity, result in a relationship that is LIMITED to mutual *agape* love without further contact or association. In other words, full reconciliation may not be possible or prudent.

While God forgives sin completely, there is always a price to be paid for the evil that results from the sin. Sometimes it is small and can be overcome, such as with an unintentional offense. However, major offenses come at great cost. An example would

be David's adultery with Bathsheba and subsequent murder of Uriah the Hittite. Besides the fact that Uriah paid with his life, a very heavy price was exacted from David for his sins even after he was completely forgiven by God. Remember what God said? Because of his adultery, the "sword would never depart from [David's] house" (II Samuel 12:10).

Finally, what do we do in cases where contact between the parties of an offense is no longer possible or perhaps one of them has since died? In these situations, we are to have the heart and mind such that we would *desire* to reconcile if we could reach out to the other person.

Is reconciliation hard? Yes, very hard. At times, it is just as difficult, if not more so, than asking God to forgive our own sins. However, reconciliation is possible with true humility and God's love.

Up to now, we have discussed the responsibilities of Christians. But how do we deal with those who are unconverted?

Offenses in the World

Those who are unconverted cannot be expected to obey God's Law or to properly deal with offenses. When offenses arise with unconverted people, Jesus Christ tells us that we are to not resist their evil:

MATTHEW 5:38-45 You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say to you, **do not resist evil**; rather, if anyone shall strike you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if anyone shall sue you before the law and take your garment, give him *your* coat also. 41 And if anyone shall compel you to go one mile, go with him two. 42 Give to the one who asks of you; and do not turn away from the one who wishes to borrow from you. 43 You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, **love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you**, 45 so that you yourselves may be *the* children of your Father Who *is* in heaven; for He causes His

sun to rise on *the* evil and on *the* good, and sends rain on *the* just and on *the* unjust.

These days, an unconverted person is unlikely to repent if they cause an offense or forgive us if we offend them. When this happens, we are to "turn the other cheek"; that is, show our enemies *agape* love, be kind to them, and pray for them. We are not to *re-sist*; that is, react in kind, against their evil. Jesus Christ said:

LUKE 6:35 But **[agape] love your enemies**, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and **your reward shall be great, and you shall be *the* children of the Highest**; for He is good to the unthankful and *the* wicked.

So, what does it mean to "turn the other cheek" and not resist their evil? Do we allow someone to continue to falsely accuse or abuse us? No! Even Jesus rebuked people or walked away on occasion. However, our first response is to establish peace if at all possible:

ROMANS 12:17-18 Do not render to anyone evil for evil, **but be prepared to do what is right in the sight of all men. 18 If possible, as much as is your part, be at peace with all men.**

When offenses with unconverted people arise, we are to establish peace if possible ("as much as is **your part**"). One approach is a "soft answer turns away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1). If we committed an offense, then an immediate apology is usually appropriate. In effect, we should offer repentance. Simply saying something such as, "I'm sorry I offended you because I value you as a friend / coworker / helper" can sometimes restore peace.

But what if we were the victim of an offense? First, avoid anger and try to defuse the situation by saying with all humility, "I'm sorry you feel that way toward me. Would you tell me why you are upset with me? I would like to try to resolve this." Failing to pacify the offender, it might be best to just walk away. It may be that the person needs time to calm down so the matter can be addressed later. As much as possible, avoid further upsetting the person. Whenever interaction is required, do "good" unto them. As it says, "do not be overcome by evil, but **overcome evil with good**." This means showing them *agape* love.