

Introduction

How many of you remember when people were allowed to smoke in public places? You can appreciate this little anecdote if you do. Tony Campolo was sitting in an airport when the man in the seat next to him pulled out a pack of cigarettes. **"Do you mind if I smoke,"** the man asked him. To which he quickly replied, **"Do you mind if I throw up,"** whereupon the man stood up and walked away.

Do you grasp what Campolo did? He set that man straight. All of us, I know, want to or will want to do the same with others and so that's what I'm going to preach about today – setting people straight.

Setting People Straight

Let's start with the word **"sins"** in verse 15. The Greek word translated that, *hamartia* in its verb form, means to **"miss the mark."** In the New Testament, the **"mark"** referred to is always God's. Thus, missing that mark always connotes ethical failure. So, a young mother I know indulges her children and lets them run the home. God's mark is that parents discipline their children and run the home. She is missing that mark. She illustrates what *hamartia* always connotes in the New Testament. It's not doing what God dictates. It's acting immorally.

Outside the New Testament, in classical literature, *hamartia* didn't always connote ethical failure. The mark referred to was sometimes not God's but wisdom's. So, I was late for the first marital meal my wife cooked for me because I went running. Wisdom's mark is that husbands be on time for the first marital meal, unless they're dead. I missed that mark. That illustrates what *harmartia* sometimes connoted outside the New Testament. It was not doing what wisdom dictates. It was acting foolishly.

We ourselves sometimes miss the mark, but in our text, Jesus is telling us what to do when it's others who miss it. The word **"brother"** in verse 15 designates who those others are. It's brothers and sisters in

Christ in the church. But what He says is applicable beyond them to everyone we know and meet as well. Also, as I've already noted, the word "**sins**" in verse 15 refers specifically to others acting sinfully. But what Jesus says is applicable beyond that to others acting foolishly as well. In verse 15, therefore, He's telling us what to do when others are missing the mark in either of those two ways. It's to set them straight. Let's examine our text, focusing on verse 15, and learn how we do that.

You Go

I begin with the pronoun "**you,**" which is supplied before the verb "**go.**" *You go.* It implies the first step in setting someone straight. We must accept the responsibility for doing so. There are two grounds of responsibility. One is an official position we have that imposes it on us, like pastor, parent, teacher, policeman, and so on. The other is an unofficial position. It's that we're the ones who can best do it. If either of those grounds is present, we recognize our responsibility to set straight and accept it.

Once we accept it, we then "**go.**" We approach the person who needs set straight. Let me quickly observe we often don't do that. For one reason or another, even though we know we should, we don't. We don't go and tell; we stay and stew instead. We may fear that things will get ugly – that the person will get defensive and attack us. Or we may lack confidence. We're concerned that we will stutter and stammer and not really say what needs to be said well. Whatever the reason is, we don't approach. We avoid. We don't go and tell. We stay and stew.

But if it's our responsibility to set straight and we think that trying to will be more helpful than harmful, we should go.

The adult son of Christian parents moved in with his girlfriend. They knew it was their responsibility to set him straight and thought trying to would be more helpful than harmful. So they approached him and kindly but clearly identified God's mark. It's virginity until marriage. They also identified the implication. He needed to move out. His

girlfriend was deeply upset by their point of view and broke up with him. He too was upset at first, but recognizing their selfless love for him, eventually got over it.

It doesn't always turn out that way of course. In fact, according to Jesus in Matthew 7:1-5, it often doesn't. The person we're trying to set straight doesn't get over it and our **"going"** is more harmful than helpful. So, we should carefully and prayerfully calculate something before going. Will it help more than harm? If so, we go. If not, we don't.

Him

Having told us to **"go"** in verse 15, Jesus tells us **"to whom."** It's **"him,"** that is, the person who needs set straight.

Notice that it isn't to others, except in the restricted context of verses 16-18. According to verse 18, leaders in the church have authority over those who comprise it. So, we can and should, if it's necessary, go to them, in verses 16-17, to elicit their help in setting a person straight. But apart from that specific context, we generally don't go to **"others"** and tell them about the person's foolishness or sin.

Unfortunately, that's exactly what we sometimes do. We don't want to go and tell the person who needs set straight. We want to go and tell others instead and so, that's what we do. We go to third parties and tell them about the person's foolishness or sin.

The guise under which we do so is often venting. A Christian neighbor of mine once told me that her sister, whom I know casually, was taking advantage of their mother. She was slyly taking some of their mother's money for her own use. **"I probably shouldn't be telling you this,"** she said, **"But I needed to vent."** You know what venting is. It's talking out an emotion or emotions. That's often our rationale for telling others. It helps, we say, to talk it out.

But does it really? According to psychologist Carol Travis, the research on this subject shows the following: **"Talking out' an emotion doesn't reduce it. It rehearses it. As you recite your grievances,**

your emotional arousal builds up again and, in addition, establishes an attitude of hostility about the source of your rage.”

The bottom line is this. Going to and telling others about the foolishness or sin of a person is almost always gossip. There are rare exceptions. Maybe we truly need advice about what to do about it from a trusted person, in confidence. Or maybe others will be seriously harmed if they aren't told. But otherwise, telling others is gossip and sin.

That then is whom we should approach – not others but the person who needs to be set straight.

In Private

We come now to the words **“in private”** in verse 15. The KJV translation is instructive, **“Between thee and thee alone.”** We should never approach the foolish or sinful in front of others.

I mentioned once that my wife followed two hard and fast rules in raising our two sons. One was that she would never yell at them. Another was that she would never confront them in public, especially in front of their friends. She believed and still does that it's more harmful than helpful and simply wrong to humiliate children in front of others.

But it isn't just children. It's adults as well. We should never embarrass anyone by making him or her respond to foolishness or sinfulness in front of others. We don't want people doing that to us. So, we shouldn't do it to them.

The words **“in private”** imply that we're to approach the foolish and sinful in a thoughtful and considerate way – not just privately but also gently, according to Galatians 6:1. It's always wrong to approach them with a spirit of anger, malice, or contempt. Our love and concern for them, not a wrong spirit, should always direct what we say and do.

Tell Him His Fault

The next words in verse 15 are **“show (‘tell’ in the KJV) him his fault.”** Let me quickly say that's easier said than done. Why? It's

because we usually we don't want to go through the pain involved in pointing out a person's foolishness or sin. What often happens, therefore, is this. We finally work up the courage to approach the person in private. But we want to soften the blow. So we don't directly address the foolish or sinful thing he or she is doing or has done. We skirt around it instead and hope he or she gets what we're trying to say.

I read about a wife who was frustrated with her husband's failure to help around the house. She finally worked up the courage to approach him about it. But wanting to soften the blow, she did so with a question instead of a statement. "**Honey, wouldn't you like to clean out the garage today?**" she asked. Unfortunately, he wasn't sharp enough to pick up on the innuendo behind her question. Responding directly to it, he examined whether or not he would like to. Then, proud of his own self-awareness and transparency, he replied, "**No, I really wouldn't,**" whereupon his wife walked away twice as conflicted as she was before. She didn't intend it to be a question. She simply wanted him to clean out the garage and do the other chores she asked.

John Ortberg tells about a management principle called *The Last 10 Percent Rule*. This rule acknowledges what we often do. We go through the hard work of setting up the difficult conversation. But then we shrink back from saying the hardest and most important truth, what is called "**the last 10 percent.**" We get fuzzy precisely when the foolish or sinful person needs clarity the most. We don't honestly identify how he or she is acting foolishly or sinfully. We speak vaguely instead and hope he or she is able to take the hint or fill in the blanks we've left open.

But to be truly helpful, we need to share "**the last 10 percent**" and here's a framework for doing so. #1 – Describe the foolish or sinful thing the person is doing or has done. #2 – Identify what its detrimental consequences are. #3 – Ask for the change in behavior needed. And #4 – Identify what the beneficial consequences of the change would be.

You Have Won Him

That brings us to the final words in verse 15, **“you have won your brother.”** They reveal our purpose in setting people straight.

Several years ago, a driver who thought I wasn't turning right on red quickly enough yelled at me and said, **“What wrong with you, you _____?”** What he asked is a profound question that theologians and philosophers have been asking for centuries. What's wrong with us (human beings)? I know the answer to that but for some reason he didn't wait around for me to give it.

My point is this. His aim in pointing out my perceived lapse was to get me to do what he wanted and/or to let me know where he stood. Neither of those is our aim if we're kingdom people. Our aim in setting the foolish and sinful straight is to assist them in hitting the mark – in living up to the standards of God and wisdom. The purpose isn't punishment but amendment or change. We want them to stop acting wrongly and start acting rightly or to stop acting less beneficially and start acting more beneficially, for God's sake and theirs. If we have any other aim in approaching them, then don't approach them.

That then is call of Jesus in verse 15. I'd sum it up in a single sentence: **“If it's our responsibility, we approach a sinful or foolish person privately, and gently tell his or her fault in order to assist him or her in hitting the mark of wisdom or God.”**

Conclusion

I point you in closing to the words **“if he listens to you.”** Jesus implies that the foolish and sinful usually don't listen to people. That's why you and I need to operate in a divine power not our own in order to set them straight. Only wisdom and love from above can overcome their natural resistance to that. Well, the only ones who have that are kingdom people, those who devotedly follow Jesus and access His kingdom at hand. They have a power, wisdom, and love that are not their own. So be a kingdom person. You'll be in a position to answer the call of Jesus in our text if you do. Set them straight!