

Matt. 18:15-20

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

SIN IN THE CHURCH

In today's passage Jesus foresees the formation of the church. And what does Jesus think is the most important thing for this new community of faith to do? How are his followers different from the world?

Jesus does not envision a community that is without sin. On the contrary, he foresees a community where sinful behavior sometimes disrupts the fellowship.

In this regard the church is not different from the world. But, the difference comes in the way Christians are called to deal with that sin.

In the world sin is often covered up or denied or blamed on someone else. In the church we are called to deal with sin by talking about it together and seeking together to go in a different direction.

This does not describe the church as I have experienced it. Quite often we do just the opposite of what Jesus tells us to do in this passage.

If we have a problem with someone, if someone has sinned against us, we do not go and talk to them privately. We often try to mask our negative feelings toward the one with whom we have a problem. And we talk about the problem with someone else.

So if Tom has a problem with Frank, he doesn't talk to Frank about the problem. He talks about the problem with Dick and Harry. This is a very ineffective and unbiblical approach to the problem.

Many of us know that the Bible teaches the direct approach. But, we often are reluctant to use this approach. We are afraid that talking with someone about a problem might cause trouble. Heaven forbid that we cause trouble.

But, I would suggest that our passive aggressive spread of gossip does not contribute to the peace, purity and unity of the church. In fact it does just the opposite.

CONFLICT IN THE EARLY CHURCH

In Paul's letters to the early church we see that conflicts are a big problem. There are major disagreements about theology. There are major disagreements about morality. There are major disagreements about leadership and worship style. In short the early church was a lot like the church, as we know it today.

And in each case Paul, like Jesus suggests that the direct approach is the best approach. Instead of talking past each other we need to talk to each other. Instead of emphasizing what we have in difference we need to emphasize what we have in common.

We have to learn how to pull together instead of pulling apart. After all we are the body of Christ. We need each other.

Conflict can have a devastating effect on the church. James in his letter to the early church talked a lot about how we need to tame the tongue. He wrote that a great forest is set ablaze by a small fire, and the tongue is a fire! And let's face it. Sometimes the church is filled with pyromaniacs!

TALK IN PRIVATE

The first line of defense in a world filled flamethrowers is simply to talk directly in private. It's amazing how often this first step actually works, if only we would take it. It's also amazing how this first step prevents us from using harmful and exaggerated language.

If I am talking directly to a person with whom I have a problem, I am less likely to make claims that cannot be justified by the facts. I will be more willing to consider my own sinfulness and how I have contributed to the problem. I will often make my argument using fewer emotional charged terms. I don't want to start a forest fire when I'm in the middle of the forest!

Another biblical principle is important when attempting to restore our relationships with brothers or sisters. The Bible tells us that "A soft answer turns away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger." (Proverbs 15:1) I have found this to be profoundly true.

I used to have a teacher who controlled her classroom in a most unusual way. When we got really loud, she would begin to speak more softly. Finally, we too would begin to quiet down as we tried to hear what she had to say.

Contrast that with those who often try unsuccessfully to quiet down a class using loud threats. It may work for a while, but quite often it just creates more confusion.

I have found that this approach also works in the church. If we can learn to speak softly, it lessens the possibility of an angry confrontation.

Of course the hard part is speaking softly when someone else is not speaking so softly!

But, it can be done, and quite often it works wonders in a relationship.

WITNESSES

But, what if it doesn't work? What if a person uses your soft tone as opportunity to dominate the conversation? That does happen. Then Jesus suggests that we invite one or two fellow members to join the conversation.

Now note that this does not mean that we decide to vent our frustrations to one or two church members! I do not believe in "venting." That is just another word for undisciplined emotional indulgence.

And this passage is all about discipline, church discipline. Church discipline is about making sure that we live up to what we have agreed to do and be as disciples of Jesus Christ. To be a disciple of Jesus means to be disciplined. That is, we agree to judge others and ourselves by a different standard.

And sometimes we need help with that. We gain that help not by talking about others on the sideline. We bring others into the conversation on the front line. Jesus said to invite one or two others into the conversation.

I can see two important reasons for this. The first is that we need witnesses.

Jesus said that two or three witnesses must confirm every word. Now that does sound like a legal proceeding. If you don't listen to me, I'm going to take you to court. In this case it may be church court, but it is court nonetheless.

Witnesses can testify to the truth in a court of law or in church court for that matter. But, if you've ever been to court you know that witnesses seldom tell exactly the same story.

Witnesses bring a different perspective to the conversation. What we believe about a disagreement may be confirmed by our witnesses or our witnesses may suggest that part of the blame lies with us. Witnesses may suggest an alternative resolution.

The second reason that it is important to invite others into the conversation is that the presence of other believers can change the dynamics in a dispute.

We may know that a soft answer turns away wrath, but we sometimes don't practice that principle. The presence of others in the conversation serves to restrain our behavior. When there are witnesses to our words, we more likely to be on our best behavior.

Now, having said this it's important to note that not everyone makes a good witness. Sometimes a person may enter the conflict situation with an axe to grind. If you think that a member of the church has wronged you, you go out and get some folks who think

just like you on this matter to be “witnesses.” And then you let that other person have it in the presence of those witnesses.

This is not what Jesus had in mind!

JESUS IS WATCHING

As I was writing this sermon an email popped up. I don’t know about you, but I just can’t resist the email “ding.” So, I looked to see what it was.

It was an old story that a church member sent me. I suspect that many of you may have heard it.

It’s about a burglar who entered a home at night. He thought the home was empty, but as he shined his flashlight around to see what he might steal he heard a voice in the dark say,

“Jesus is watching you.”

He froze and quickly turned off the flashlight, and again he heard the voice say in the pitch dark, “Jesus is watching you.”

Frantically he sought the source of the voice with his flashlight. He found it. It was a parrot in a cage in the corner who said once again, “Jesus is watching you.”

This was apparently a very bright parrot because when the burglar asked the bird, “Did you say that?” the bird responded, “Yes, I did. I’m just trying to warn you that he is watching you.”

The burglar asked, “Who do you think you are?” And the bird replied, “Moses.”

“Moses, what kind of person names a bird Moses?” And the parrot replied, “The same kind of person who names their Rottweiler Jesus!”

That story makes us laugh, but it also tells the truth about some people approach faith. They name their Rottweiler Jesus or more to the point they turn Jesus into a Rottweiler. They turn the Christian faith into a ferocious guard dog, an agent of judgment and destruction instead of a means of grace.

There are probably people here today who grew up with a portrait of Jesus that was more akin to a Rottweiler than the Jesus revealed in the Bible. That’s why when I tell someone that I’m a minister they sometimes respond negatively or defensively. They have experienced the Rottweiler named Jesus, and they don’t want to have anything to do with that faith.

That's why we need to be very careful in how we interpret passages like the one we study today. We need to remember the goal of what we do. We seek to restore broken relationships. We seek to redeem and not to punish.

Fully a third of our church's polity is based upon this text. We call it The Rules of Discipline. And in the preamble to those rules we read this,

“The power that Jesus Christ has vested in his Church, a power manifested in the exercise of church discipline, is one for building up the body of Christ, not for destroying it, for redeeming, not for punishing. It should be exercised as a dispensation of mercy and not of wrath so that the great ends of the church may be achieved, that all children of God may be presented faultless in the day of Christ.”

SETTING RULES AND BOUNDARIES

Many of us seek to discipline our children. In other words we seek to restrain bad behavior and encourage good behavior. Why do we do that? Do we want to spoil their fun?

No. We discipline our children in order to redeem them. We discipline our children so that they might learn personal boundaries and the rules of society. We discipline our children so that they might in the long run learn self-discipline. If it is done correctly disciplining our children is the supreme act of mercy and grace.

The same is true in the church. Our rules, our boundaries are different from the rules of general society. And order to be faithful to our commitment to Christ we have to remind each other of who we are and Whose we are.

In a certain respect almost all the meetings of the church can be a part of this process of reconciliation and redemption. One of the things I always tell churches in conflict is this. Make sure every idea that comes before the session is first evaluated by a committee.

This seems like such an obvious and mundane thing, but quite often this rule is not followed. Someone will have an axe to grind on some issue, and they will quite insistently bring up a motion to be acted upon immediately by the leadership of the church. Quite often this recommendation is not really a new idea for the church but a subtle way to settle a personal score.

I must admit that we ministers are often bad about this. Instead of using the polity of the church to seek the will of Christ we use the polity of the church to seek our own will.

And the results are often divisive.

Suppose we let a committee look at the suggestion? Maybe the suggestion has merit or maybe the suggestion is merely a person trying to get his or her way on a particular issue or even to settle a personal score.

The step of bringing “other witnesses” into the process can help turn potential conflict into an opportunity to grow in the faith.

TELL IT TO THE CHURCH

But, what if nothing works? Suppose we talk with someone personally, but can’t get a conflict resolved? And suppose that even after we bring sensitive witnesses into the mix the conflict still persists or even intensifies? What can we do?

Jesus foresees such a possibility, and he has an answer. Tell it to the church. Full disclosure is the church’s solution to persistent conflict. And if that doesn’t work then in some cases it may be necessary to treat the offender like an outsider.

Jesus said, “...tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Now Jesus spoke to a Jewish audience. Who were the Gentiles and tax collectors in his day? They were people who were outside the faith or those who had put themselves outside of the faith by their own actions.

I think that this is the most difficult part of our passage. What does it mean? How can we apply this part of the passage in a practical way?

In the past some church officials have used this passage to suggest that they had the keys to the kingdom and that therefore they had the power to exclude people not only from the church but also from God’s salvation. Harsh judgments were made on the basis of theological disagreements and political considerations.

I don’t know about you, but those decisions seem to be a bit above my pay grade. Jesus said that if we judge others harshly that we judge ourselves. (Matthew 7:1-5) No, even when our disagreements go beyond personal disagreements to a matter for the whole church to decide, we must remember that our goal is always grace and not judgment.

The apostle Paul describes ministry as the ministry of reconciliation. We forgive each other as God in Christ has forgiven us. (2 Corinthians 5:18) Through the power of God’s Spirit in Christ Jesus we become the human face of forgiveness. That’s why we say it each week in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

I heard a leader in the church say, “I wish we could get beyond all these squabbles and arguments and meetings and get on with the *real* business of the church.”

But, then he said,

“But, maybe getting along with each other, settling our disputes in a Christ-like way, is the real business of the church. The easiest thing would be to sweep our differences under the carpet, put a smile on our faces, and deny the disagreements.

Jesus commands us to confront one another, to work for reconciliation. Much is at stake here, nothing less than the survival of the body of Christ as the body of Christ.”

I'm not sure how we will get by some of the big disagreements in the church today. The language has gotten pretty harsh, and on some issues it seems like we have no common ground.

But, I do know this. We serve a common Savior who died for us, whose blood was shed for us, whose body was broken for us.

And we know that no matter how bad things get that salvation changed the world forever. That salvation overcame the power of sin and death. And one day that salvation will lead us home.

Let us remember that salvation once again. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. And God has given us this ministry of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:18-19)

Let us once again partake of this holy meal and remember that one day our differences will be a thing of the past.

One day people will come from all over, from the North, from the South, from the East and from the West to sit at God's table of grace and salvation. Let us live for that great day.

Amen.