

When Sin Is Seen.

September 2020

Matthew 18.15-20

If Your Brother Sins Against You

15 “If your brother *or sister* sins ~~against you~~, go and tell him his fault, between you and him/*her* alone. If he/*she* listens to you, you have gained your brother *or sister*. **16** But if he/*she* does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. **17** If he/*she* refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he/*she* refuses to listen even to the church, let him/*her* be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. **18** Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. **19** Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. **20** For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Intro:

This is a passage I have picked up with heavy heart several times in my ministry.

Both sin and conflict over perceived wrong doing is to be expected but unresolved conflict has often been part of my church experience.

That conflict over perceived wrongdoing continues in churches is surprising as these 5 verses coming from the Lord Jesus, Head of the Church give a very clear, 3 step road map for conflict resolution concerning wrong doing -real or imagined- in the church.

What makes it so complicated to the point where this just runs stuck without being resolved?

What is in here that gets missed?

Is there some Hebrew grammar or Greek syntax that holds the key? !!

Not really, but I will make a textual note about two ways this could be understood.

Having had 30 plus years to consider here comes what I see in 2020.

I would not be surprised if what I bring here is life changing!

Text

So as we follow Matthew’s Gospel here in considering the church setting for overcoming sin, I need to ask two prior interpretive questions:

Q1. Do you see church as the fellowship of believers, each responsible for each other and forming a living temple for God’s presence, or, is church more institutional with positions of power, responsibility, obligations and procedures for operating etc.

A1. Here Jesus addresses it as a bonded group of people responsible for each other, a family made up as a voluntary association for brothers and sisters in Christ.

The word *ecclesia* is no about institution but a fellowship of people hosting the Spirit of God. It’s an organic structure of living stones.

Now a second basic question:

Q2. When you look at others in Trinity Church -even here on Zoom- what do you see or how do you see them?

A2. Jesus assumes that what we see in each other is a brother or a sister.¹

¹ From Ian Paul: The term *adelphos* cannot here mean a male disciple only, since Jesus has already taught (in Matt 12.50) that the new kinship group of his disciples includes his metaphorical ‘brother and sister and mother’, and Matt 27.55 makes it clear that women are part of the group of disciples. Thus most modern translations render this ‘your brother or sister’ as they do in Matt 5.22–24; the limiting of the ESV to one sex ‘your brother’ is without warrant.

He assumes that we see in each other a fellow disciple and someone related in God's family. He assumes we see a brother or sister for whom we care and feel responsible. Is that the case for you?

This is what you carry when you pray: "Our Father..." to express our shared prayer?

These two points determine how we now hear Jesus in today's passage.

Verse 15 begins: (modified ESV)

"If your brother *or sister* sins ~~against you~~, go and tell him/*her* his/*her* fault, between you and him/*her* alone. If he/*she* listens to you, you have gained your brother *or sister*."

So if someone you consider a brother or sister, one with whom fellowship is the context for the indwelling of the Spirit of the Lord, someone you care for as being from your own family, If they appear to sin, what do you do?

Now there is a small Greek textual issue here which you may have picked up in the way I just read v.15. I read,

"If your brother or sister sins",

as opposed to

"If your brother or sister sins against you."²

It's clear in the Greek that the original text was more likely, "If your brother or sister sins" with the confusion being made in later copying with syllables that sound the same being formed into different words.

Q3 Are you lost in Greek now?

A3 Don't worry.

The point of all this highlights the focus of this first verse as being about engaging dearly related brothers and sisters caught in sin with the awareness of what that means for them and the whole fellowship of the church.

This is care driven. It is not a police action about getting people back into line or some version of inquisition lite.

The way Jesus assumes we look at each other is a community concerned for each other, taking responsibility for each other's spiritual well-being. The concern to win over the brother or sister reflects the shared concern by each one that reflects God's own passion that 'none should be lost'. That is the heart behind this.

This may not be automatic or obvious because in a formally constituted church with an appointed leadership it is easy for the 'ordinary' disciple to hide behind that authority structure and to leave it all to the official leaders. That is like appealing to Cain's question 'Am I my brother's keeper?' and

² Ian Paul: Most of the later manuscripts follow 'sin' with 'against you', and thus many English translations include this. But the earliest manuscripts do not include it; it is hard to imagine why a copyist would drop the phrase; and the phrase εις σε sounds exactly the same as the ending of the verb αμαρτηση so it is easy to see how it could be added by mistake. The whole tenor of these instructions is about concern for the brother or sister, and not about settling a grievance (though that question is addressed later) and so we can be confident that it was not original.

assuming No. This passage says that the answer is Yes. In a community of 'little ones' each must be concerned about and take responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the other.³

So back to the question: How do you see others in church? Are we primarily brothers and sisters in the fellowship of Jesus concerned for each other's well-being in holiness? Or might we need to look at each other in another way?

Application A

If we do see each other as brothers and sisters and seek to help each other to live pure and holy lives, Jesus' teaching is guidance on how to pursue that concern for the other while understanding how entangling sin may be.

Step 1: Make the personal approach.

- Brother, sister I see that you are
- Is this what God desires?
- Can I help you overcome this?

The best outcome is recovery of a brother or sister from their entanglement in sin.

But, if it doesn't work:

Step 2: Take two others with you to repeat the conversation now with 2 witnesses.

- Brother, sister we see that you are
- Is this what God desires?
- Can we help you overcome this?

The best outcome is recovery of a brother or sister.

But, if it doesn't work:

Step 3: Take the matter to the church/congregation.

- Brother, sister we see that you are
- Is this what God desires?
- Can we help you overcome this?

The best outcome is recovery of a brother or sister.

But, if it doesn't work:

Then they need to be let go of as church members in fellowship.

There is no place in the church of brothers and sisters in the Lord for clear intentional ongoing unrepentant sin. Let that one go.

Once again I need to say that this is church like family. Not a legal system. It's about each caring for the other, and the whole. It's not just the elders, or the pastors or some self-appointed sin management enthusiasts making it their business. It's everyone's care just as when the congregation commits to support the newly baptised.

³ (R T France, NICNT, p 692).

Application B

So where are we now?

You might be agreeing with me so far?

Or, you might be saying, I wish we could relate like that?

Or, you might be saying, no way, this can never be!

Q4 Let me now ask a diagnostic question when it comes to considering who your brothers and sisters are: Does that include pastors?

Are pastors, priests, vicars or ministers to be primarily considered as brothers and sisters or are they/we something else?

What it comes down to can be either:

- A. They/we are essentially brothers and sisters -as with every member of the church- then what Jesus taught above applies 100%. If they/we seem to sin -even possibly against you- then something needs to be repaired, they need to be regained as ones in peril of being lost and the body healed. Only then does Jesus' teaching work.
- B. However, if on the other hand, they/we are not primarily brothers and sisters but paid service providers or elected leaders, then other provisions will apply.

You may know that in some traditions -such as the Roman Catholic Church- at times it was claimed that priestly ordination somehow changed a man into a priest. They were considered ontologically changed from the basic church member. To Protestants that is of course officially nonsense but something of this may still linger? The damage it could do, which some pastors actually cultivate, is that they are no longer primarily brothers, yes brothers, but something else – yea, such are the Lord's anointed. This can be very subtle or very blatant especially in cultures of deference.

Q5 So if this is you, how do you address someone who is more than a mere brother in the Lord?

A5 In my experience the most common means is using the institutional dimensions of church. I have experienced this several times.

What I have experienced in several contexts is that instead of seeing me as a brother -possibly one prone to sin- people behave like unhappy consumers and write to the Bishop as if he is the upline customer services manager.

It's the equivalent of going to Jesus' step 2 or 3 straight away.
What happened to step 1? And Jesus wept!

What happened to going to the pastor or priest as a brother or sister -one to one- and saying, I fear you are falling into sin? Is that not what Jesus set out?
Why does today's Gospel reading so easily get ignored by all concerned as if it's irrelevant?

Illustration:

2005 was a rough year in Trinity Church. Many people were unhappy with each other, the church and me as pastor. Over coffee after every Sunday service there were huddles of people talking intently and secretively in various corners as if comparing notes and grievances - not a pretty sight! It eventually led to a Bishop visiting for a week to look into it all. I was put under the microscope and investigated.

Just as that ended the Archdeacon of the day handed me a folder of correspondence he had received. I took it home and opened it. I discovered that so many people had written letters of complaint about me. It was remarkable reading! I had no idea that some of them were so bothered by me, but this was before Facebook!

But here is the thing: In my case a first response to concern and unhappiness was to write a letter to the Bishop. What would Jesus say to that? Looks like beginning at step 2.5. Why is that? It has happened more recently too.

Sometimes people are unhappy with me and their opening statement is to demand an apology or else. At that point I understand their model of church and our relationship. It has nothing to do with Matthew 18.15-20. Whatever Jesus said, they have formed their own road map. What I see is that for quite a few church members their operational theology is formed more by culture and personal background than the word of Jesus.

Consequently the pastor is not so much a brother as a service provider and if he/she falls below expectations you either demand an apology to justify your complaint, and if that doesn't come quickly enough you write to his upline manager.

That is so different from what Jesus teaches where you view a brother or sister in possible sin as one to regain so the fellowship may be repaired. Instead when the pressure builds people may view the spec in another's eye through the log in their own as an occasion for powerplay. That is not how Jesus instructs brothers and sisters relate or behave.

You can be church like that, but it's not church *ala* Jesus.

Conclusion:

So sin comes – even in church. Don't be surprised. Jesus teaches us to be serious about sin and address it. With this the priority is on regaining the one who is sliding into sin. The value is on the precious fellowship of the Church.

I want to suggest that pastors are part of this too and not in some distinct category. Matthew 18.15ff applies to us too.

The real victory is winning back someone who is in peril.
If you see me sliding, come and tell me.

That applies to your next pastor too.