

# Conflict Resolution

Ezekiel 33:7-11; Romans 13:1-10; Matthew 18:10-20

Mark Twain once said "Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture they do not understand, but the passages that bother me are those I do understand."

Our gospel passage may have some things that are hard to understand but it is the bits that are most clear that perhaps bother us most. Jesus, without one of his nice stories or agricultural images, directly tells us how we are to deal with sin within the Christian community. The process he outlines is quite intimidating and we might wonder if we could put it into practice and further may wonder what would happen if we did.

As we consider what Jesus teaches I pray that we will not only understand further the wisdom of what is taught but may also find ourselves challenged about pride, sin, forgiveness and what it means to be Christ's people. For plainly we are taught in this passage that we have a responsibility to deal with sin in Christ's church in Christ's name.

## PUTTING THIS IN CONTEXT

To avoid misunderstanding this passage or worse misusing it, it is important that we understand the context in which it is given and the teaching that surrounds it.

### Humility (18:1-5)

At the beginning of the chapter the disciples are again worrying about who will be the greatest. Jesus challenges them to rethink their categories. Pointing out one of the children who are present he calls on his followers to realise that humility not pride is the path to greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Because of this, the Kingdom is to open to all who are humble, who are little ones and by welcoming such in we are in fact welcoming in Christ.

### The seriousness of sin (18:6-9)

Jesus then moves on to speak about the seriousness of sin. To cause someone to sin will have disastrous consequences. Our attitude to our own sin should radical surgery not toleration or moderation.

### God's care for each member of the flock. (18:10-14)

Then Jesus highlights God's care for each and every member of his flock, especially for those who seem unimportant or who appear to have fallen into sin. God's followers are not to look down on such little ones for God's desire and delight is when people come back to him and he wants to lose none.

### Forgiveness (18:21-35)

Finally after our passage Jesus memorably teaches about the need for his followers to show the same willingness to forgive as God has shown us. To not be willing to forgive each other is an affront to God's forgiveness.

### Impact on Jesus teaching

Each of these elements has an impact on Jesus' teaching in 18:15-17. Without considering these things it would be possible to see what is said as due process for how you excommunicate someone from the church.

In context we see it is rather how those who have humbled themselves before God, well aware of their own sinfulness and need of God's forgiveness seek to imitate the Father's concern for the wandering Sheep.

These verses then are not about severing relationships but aiming to restore them, no kicking someone out, but rather a desire to welcome back in.

The letter of James puts it this way “My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:19-20)

Paul in his letter to the Galatians said “My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted.” (Galatians 6:1)

It is in that spirit, which is of course God’s Spirit that we should consider what Jesus says.

## DEALING WITH SIN

### The Problem

#### Brother

Jesus is considering issues within the community, about members of the church. In the Greek it is if a brother sins.

We are immediately alerted of two things this teaching is about how we deal with sin within the church. It is not a licence to march up to people in the street and try to point out the error or their ways. Sadly I have seen this with street preachers, memorably at Sydney Uni when a couple walking past holding hands were accused by the evangelist of being filled with lust. Now as they were Uni students this is entirely possible, but this was not the time or place and he was not the person to point it out.

But perhaps more importantly this language of brother, or for that matter sister, reminds us that this is teaching for all members of the Church, it is not for the leaders or the important ones, it is for each person to deal with.

#### Sins

Secondly the issue is one of sin. The text speaks of being sinned against but given what Jesus has said about sin it is a wider issue than that. It is the presence of sin in the Christian community that should be dealt with.

Do we ever think that way? Do we take the issue of sin serious, consider it something that should be removed from our lives and from our community? It is a sad fact that Christians, or to make it more personal, we are often indistinguishable from our non Christian neighbours and it is not because the world has started behaving itself. I strongly suspect we have lost not just our revulsion at sin but our sense of sin entirely.

Matthew makes it plain that Jesus has a horror of sin, and so when Jesus speaks of a brother sinning this is not and should never be a minor matter, it is something that has to be dealt with. This chapter is a call to sharpen our sense of sin not only for our own sake but also for the sake of our fellow believers. We can only call others to account if we are continuing to watch ourselves.

### Three Step Programme

Jesus has a three step programme for dealing with this situation.

#### Step One: Private discussion (v15)

Firstly we should seek to deal with the matter privately with our fellow believer. The passage puts the responsibility on us to go to them, to seek the opportunity to deal with the matter. I suspect that for many of us this is the most difficult part of this teaching. Remember the aim is to not to vindicate yourself, or show how much more spiritual you are but in humility and out of concern for your fellow believer seek to restore them.

What Jesus teaches avoids and should prevent two other common responses to such a situation. The first is gossip: “Have you heard what they said”; or the more spiritual version: “I think we should pray for them because I heard them say ...”

The other is triangulation, speaking to someone else to get them to do something. "I didn't want to say anything, and don't say I said anything but" This immediately escalates the situation. If I can be frank this often happens in Church leadership, people feel they can't talk to the Dean so they will speak to his assistant, especially if they are new. If there is a problem please speak to me.

By dealing with issues the way Jesus envisages as matter involving only two people misunderstandings can be quickly resolved, forgiveness quickly practiced and relationship restored.

How many churches would be in a better place if there were concerned conversations rather than destructive gossip, speaking to restore rather than whispering to tear down. It may be worth saying there is wisdom in what Jesus teaches here in all relationships. If we have a problem with someone we should talk with them about it, whether that be within a marriage, a family or a work situation.

#### Step Two: With a small group (v16)

Step one will not always work, but if it is sin then the matter needs to be dealt with and should not be left, that is dangerous to both the one who is sinning and those who may be affected. A small group of responsible people should now be brought in. This ensures that it is not just a matter of private outlook or a difference of opinion.

#### Step Three: The whole church (v17)

If this does not lead to repentance and restoration Jesus says that the whole church should be informed. Just as earlier Jesus had indicated that sin was not to be tolerated in our lives, sin cannot be tolerated in the Christian community. To do so would only be likely to lead others into sin.

Even here I would suggest that this is for the benefit of the one who is sinning. This removal from fellowship is so that he or she will realise they cannot sin without consequence. Jesus reinforces this by speaking of how decisions of the church are honoured in heaven, and that the fellowship of believers is where Jesus is.

### **PUTTING THIS INTO PRACTICE**

I have a number of concerns in preaching this passage. Firstly I am afraid that for the next few weeks if I say that I want to speak to any of you, you will immediately think that I am about try and point out sin in your life.

Secondly I am concerned that it might set off a whole series of conversations within the congregations or with me where people seek to set each other right without suitable humility, repentance and compassion with possibly disastrous consequences.

Thirdly I am concerned that I will be held accountable to this passage and what that might mean if, God forbid, we had something that reached stage three, something I have not experienced.

But mostly I am concerned that it will have no impact at all, that it will all seem too hard and we will not take up the challenge this passage places on us to care for our fellow believer.

We may have seen situations where people have fallen into sin, whether it be in their relationships, in their work or in some other way and thought "There but for the grace of God, go I." This passage encourages us to hope that it would be the grace of God and the care of fellow Christians which would keep us off the road to ruin through sin.

Throughout church history, and in the history of a many a local church, it is a tragedy this teaching of Jesus has not been carried out. It certainly can be difficult, embarrassing and painful but this cannot be compared to the damage that sin can cause to individuals and to body of the church. Some of us may sadly be able to look back with a sense of if only ...

If we see someone acting or speaking in a sexually inappropriate manner is it right to do nothing?

If someone is always tearing down other church members is it right to let it continue?

This is not the way of Christ's church and for the sake of Christ's church we each need to deal with it in Christ's way as we care for Christ's flock.

I wonder if we need to think again about Jesus promise to be with his people when they meet together. It is a wonderfully comforting promise, that is true. But if he is with us should this not also motivate us to humble, repentant, compassionate dealing with sin. We know his thoughts on the matter, his attitude towards sin, his desire for sin to be dealt with, sinners reconciled. Shouldn't we behave differently knowing he is here?