

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 54”

Matthew 18:15-20

The atmosphere is tense. Few words are spoken. There's quite a bit of clattering with the washing-up.

“OK. What's the matter, then?”

“Nothing.”

“Yes, there is – it's obvious. What's the problem?”

“Nothing. Honestly.”

It goes on for a few hours – days, even. And then – “Come on. What have I done?”

“Well, since you ask: I wasn't really very happy that you finished off the crossword when I was in the loo.” Or, “I didn't very much like the way you implied I'd eaten all the chocolate.” Or something like that.

But now it's out in the open. (By the way, those scenarios are totally fictitious.) You can deal with it. The issue is sorted out – usually – and life can go on once again. In the mean time, there's been a build-up of resentment, probably on both sides, and the relationship has suffered in some way.

It's relationships that Jesus is talking about in this eighteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel. We've already seen that Jesus has responded to his disciples questions about what the pecking order might be like in the coming Kingdom of God by telling them about the need for humility, for the right attitudes to status, to others and to sin. He's given the story of a shepherd searching for a sheep that has wandered away to illustrate the need to look out for each other and to keep the flock – the church – together as a body: the need for care and concern. Now he goes on to talk about openness and honesty with each other.

Many people would suggest that this little section sets down some kind of disciplinary procedure to be followed in the event of someone in the congregation sinning. But, although it obviously provides a good basis for such a procedure, I think this is a set of fairly common sense guidelines that Jesus is suggesting to try and help Christians get along with each other. After all, when you become a follower of Jesus and join a church, you get thrown together with all kinds of people, many of whom – most of whom – are quite different from you and not necessarily the people you'd choose to be friends with. And those people are going to do things and say things that, from time to time, are going to annoy you, upset you and even hurt you. And you will almost certainly do things which are going to affect other people too. Jesus' advice here is to get it sorted – don't let such things fester and build up bitterness and resentment between you. That is, I believe, one of the most usual ways the devil uses to try and cause problems in a congregation – and, by and large, we've so far managed to avoid that here. So it's a good time to talk about this – a kind of pre-emptive strike, if you like!

So, Jesus says, someone's sinned against you, upset you, hurt you – even damaged your reputation or doubted your integrity and there's a need for forgiveness (which he will expand on in the section we look at next time). If there is to be forgiveness, then you've got to face up to the issues that are at the heart of this. It looks as if we're talking about more than a simple misunderstanding here, but the first step Jesus suggests will certainly help towards sorting that out. This is about something you really feel keenly about and, as we've said, if you don't get it sorted, it will cause bitterness and really poison the relationship you should have with that person. You can't simply brush it under the carpet. So you need to make a move. In his thoughts on this passage, Tom Wright says this:

“Forgiveness doesn't mean saying ‘It didn't really happen’ or ‘It didn't really matter’. In either of those cases, you don't need forgiveness, you just need to clear up a misunderstanding. Forgiveness is when it did happen, and it did matter, and you're going to deal with it and end up loving and accepting one another again anyway.”

So, you need to be open. And Jesus says, “Go ...”. This is about a face to face meeting. You don't send someone else along to sort it out on your behalf – that can lead to all sorts of further problems, misunderstandings and things getting lost in translation, as it were. Now, in Jesus' day, there was probably no other means of communication unless you were literate and could afford a piece of paper. Today we might be tempted to write or to e-mail or, heaven preserve us! text. But those means of communication cannot convey tone of voice or facial expression – and then you have to wait for a response. Even a 'phone call can cause misunderstanding. No. Go and speak to the person one to one. There shouldn't be any need to try and avoid that, really. Michael Green writes: *“There is no need for Christian brothers and sisters to dread confrontation. After all, we are all accepted by God.”* Easier said than done, maybe, but a pretty good place to start.

And the idea is that you're trying to help the other person realise what they've done and face up to it. So that means careful listening by both sides. Jesus talks about the one who has done the wrong listening – in fact, it's the verb that is used most often in this little passage: four times in three verses (*vv15,16,17*). It's quite possible that the other person hasn't even realised just how much they've hurt you. Some of you may have seen a documentary about comedy and religion on the television some months ago. Ann Widdicombe was looking at the ways in which many comedians are really savage in their attacks on religion these days and at one point she was talking to Marcus Brigstocke, who is a particularly vocal opponent of religion. She explained to him just how much what he said about her Saviour and Lord really hurt her and, to be fair, he did accept that and offered a kind of apology – although it hasn't really affected his shows! But if it works, says Jesus, that's great.

If it doesn't work – if there is no resolution and the person who has wronged you refuses to acknowledge the problem or is unable to see what the problem is, then you need to go a step further. Take a couple of other people with you, says Jesus, and have another go. In many Bibles the second part of v16 is in quotation marks – “so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses’.” It is probably marked in a footnote or your margin that this is a quotation from *Deuteronomy 19:15*, part of the law code God gave his people through Moses. There it is so that no-one is ever accused on the sole testimony of one witness, so there's a quasi-judicial context to it. I'm not sure that this is about taking two people who have witnessed the original offence here. This is about support and integrity – again, a sense of openness.

You've had a dispute with someone else and you want it sorted. One to one, face to face conversation hasn't worked, but you've tried. So next time take someone else – a couple of trusted friends who can see that you're doing your best to sort it out. They might be able quietly to pray for you while you are confronting the other person. They might be able to confirm to the wrongdoer just how upset you've been. They might even offer some advice. But it's no longer just you against him or her. They can vouch for your attempt to resolve the issue. That might do the trick and bring about a resolution and a reconciliation.

But if it doesn't, then go one step further. This is now a matter for the whole community. Matthew uses a word here which refers to an assembly. It's the word which is usually translated as “*church*”, and it's only used twice in all the Gospels in that way. But the idea is that a broken relationship will affect the whole congregation. There is the potential for people to take sides. There is the possibility of tension and a bad atmosphere in meetings. There is a real sense in which this is a sin which will adversely affect the witness of that congregation. So, again in a spirit of openness and honesty, the matter needs to be referred to the church as a whole. Quite how that happens isn't made clear here. I suspect Jesus wasn't thinking of putting it on the weekly notice sheet, nor a special supplement in the monthly magazine – *Vision's* pull-out guide to who's not getting on with whom this month. It probably means seeking the advice and help of the church leaders and other members of the congregation praying about it. It doesn't mean we have to keep setting up kangaroo courts to settle arguments as part of the church meeting.

The very last resort, to save the community from further disruption and division and to make sure people outside know that the congregation is serious about such things, is excommunication. This is the only basis for that which Jesus gives in his teaching – someone who has wronged another and will not face up to it. The person who has caused the wrong is to be treated as “*a pagan or a tax collector*”. Those were the people in the culture of the synagogue (remember, Matthew's first readers were Jewish believers) who were to be shunned. Jesus shows in other places that he reaches out to and shares his love with such

people, but this is just a shorthand phrase to express this particular idea. We have similar things in English – when we say we’re “*sending someone to Coventry*”, it doesn’t mean that we’ve got anything against Coventry as such. They are to be recognised as not keeping to the standards of the Kingdom, so they are told to leave as their behaviour and attitudes are not compatible with the standards Jesus has set. But we are to keep on loving them and trying to win them back nonetheless.

And Jesus goes on in v18 to say that this is all done under the gaze of heaven. This verse is a bit difficult to understand and there are all kinds of things that can be said about the tenses used and all that. Basically, I think, this means that all of this stuff has eternal consequences. Eugene Peterson catches a flavour of that when he translates this verse in *The Message* as, “*A yes on earth is a yes in heaven; a no on earth is a no in heaven. What you say to one another is eternal.*” In other words, this is serious stuff, folks, so try and get it right.

For that really to happen, it’s vital that there is agreement and unity in it all. That’s where v19 is going. This verse is often quoted by those who want us to pray in unity and with real faith, but in this context this is about agreeing on a plan of action and expecting God to honour it if it is done with honesty and integrity. After all, as Jesus says in the last verse, you need to remember who is at the heart of all this. When you’re doing stuff together, when you’re acting together on Kingdom business, you can be sure that Jesus will be present with you. Don’t forget that he is part of all this. This isn’t about settling scores, scoring points, making points, making sure you get your way. This is about working together, under the gaze of heaven, in the context of eternity, with Christ at the very heart of it all, to ensure that the values of the Kingdom of God are upheld and that all God’s people are able to live and work together for his glory.

We can’t do that unless there is a spirit of openness, honesty and integrity about our life together. We need to approach our work for Jesus and our care and concern for each other with transparency, aware of the needs and concerns of others, but always wanting to show that we are truly followers of Jesus by allowing others people to see that he is at the heart of all we do. We’re still human and things are still going to go wrong from time to time, and when they do, we need to face up to that and seek and offer forgiveness. That takes us into the next section of this chapter, and we’ll look at that next time.

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If necessary, go one step further. This is now a matter for the whole community. A broken relationship will affect the whole congregation. There is a real sense in which this is a sin which will adversely affect the witness of that congregation. So, again in a spirit of openness and honesty, the matter needs to be referred to the church as a whole.

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Questions for discussion

1. Why are relationships between followers of Jesus so important? Have you ever had any difficulties in this area? (No need to go into detail, nor name names!)
2. Do you think we are too scared of confrontation in the Church? Why/why not?
3. Why is listening so vital in this context?
4. How would you suggest that such things are told to the church (*v17*)? Would that do more harm than good?
5. How could we make ourselves more aware that Jesus is with us when we meet together?
6. Do you need to do anything as a result of reading this passage?