

Seeking Reconciliation – Matthew 18:15-20

Introduction

How do you respond when people do the wrong thing?

Are you the type of person who loves conflict, and is happy to confront people? Or do you prefer to ignore it, and just hope that they stop on their own (or at least don't drag you into things)?

This is the question that Jesus deals with in today's passage. How *should* we respond when our Christian brothers and sisters sin?

Let's see what Jesus has to say.

Matthew 18:15-20 - *"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*

"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.

"Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." (NIV)

We should deal with sin

The first thing that we can see in this passage is that Jesus is teaching his disciples that we should deal with sin within the Christian community. In verse 15, Jesus says "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault..." (Matt 18:15). The only requirement to make the sin worth dealing with is: it's sin.

If you've been following along in our sermon series, this should not be surprising. Two weeks ago we were looking at Matthew 18:6-9, where Jesus talks about the seriousness of sin in this way:

Matthew 18:8 - *If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. (NIV)*

Sin is serious, and we must deal with seriously - potentially with drastic measures! Each individual in the church - including you - should be willing to confront sin in other members of the church. Based on the question that Peter asks in Matthew 18:21, one particular area where we should be ready to tackle sin head-on is when we feel we have been personally wronged by a brother or sister. This is particularly important to deal with, as any unresolved bitterness and anger between members of Christ's body can cause disunity, which the apostle Paul refers to as a foothold for the devil.¹

This can be really hard! I know that I am a conflict avoider. I don't like to start significant arguments, or to tell people that they are wrong, or make them feel guilty. This means that I feel **really** uncomfortable calling

¹ Eph 4:27-27 - "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. (NIV)

attention to peoples' sin and calling on them to change. I'd much rather just ignore it, and hope it goes away. Unfortunately, this rarely works.

Jesus is teaching his disciples here that this passive conflict avoidance is not okay among people who follow him. We must acknowledge and deal with sin in our midst. This call isn't just to leaders in the church, but each disciple of Jesus must take sin seriously and be ready to respond to it. Luckily, this isn't the end of what Jesus says! The rest of our passage today is about how we should deal with sin.

By seeking reconciliation

Jesus gives us a method to resolve these conflicts, and through it shows us that we should be seeking reconciliation with our brothers and sisters.

***Matthew 18:15-17** - "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (NIV)*

The method Jesus describes is pretty straightforward. It almost feels like it should be a part of a policy book for a HR department: start by talking to them one on one, then if they don't listen pull in someone else to back you up, and then if they still don't listen, bring it to the attention of the church and get them all the weight in. Easy.

At each step, the brother or sister has the opportunity to turn away from their sin, and to be restored to the community. This is even the aim! Jesus doesn't call on us to "make an example" of them, or to judge sin harshly, or to require any acts of penance or ritual to be restored. All that is required is for the brother or sister to take to heart the correction.

If you've been following along in our sermon series, this might be surprising. After all, we've already looked at Matthew 18:8 where Jesus says:

***Matthew 18:8** - If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. (NIV)*

If sin is serious enough that it's more worthwhile to lose your hand or foot than to continue to sin, why is Jesus teaching us to treat sin so gently in others? I think the answer to this comes from the passage that we looked at last week, in Matthew 18:10-14:

***Matthew 18:12-14** - "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish." (NIV)*

God loves all believers, even (and especially) the ones who have wandered away. He doesn't want anyone to perish, so we shouldn't either. When people sin, our aim should never be to punish the sinner, but we should always be focused on doing everything we can to bring about reconciliation, both towards God and towards other people.

Unfortunately, this won't always work out the way we want it to. Whether due to stubbornness, pride, or whatever other reason, sometimes people won't listen. They will persist in their sin. In this case, we are to treat them as we would a pagan or a tax collector - as someone who is no longer a part of the church.

This sounds like an extreme step to take - and it is - but I think this is actually quite a *restrained* response to sin. After all, how did Jesus treat tax collectors and pagans? He ate with them, he chatted with them, he healed them, he cared for them, and he sought their good. He also called them to repent and to follow him.

Even today, people who disobey the Mormon, Jehovah's Witness, or Muslim authorities can be completely shunned, or even physically assaulted or killed. Some Christians even misinterpret and twist Jesus' words in this passage to justify harsh social and physical judgement of sin. This is not what Jesus calls us to do!

I have once heard it said that for Christians, the message doesn't really change depending on whether someone is within or outside the church. If we are talking to someone who doesn't follow Jesus the message is "come, follow him". If we are talking to someone who already follows Jesus, the message is "keep following him".

Our mission is always to see our brother or sister reconciled - with God and with the church - whether they are inside or outside the church. We are always seeking reconciliation.

In Jesus' power

This brings us to the second half of our passage, verses 18-20. These are a little bit trickier to understand, but Jesus is trying to give his disciples confidence that he's got their back as they deal with sin.

Matthew 18:18-20 - "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.

"Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." (NIV)

Jesus signals that each of these three verses is saying the same thing, by the way he starts each sentence. "Truly I tell you", then "again, truly I tell you", then "for". This repetition serves to emphasise this point - the disciples should have confidence in their judgements, and in their reconciliation, because they are operating with Jesus' power.

Verse 18 speaks of the disciples "binding" and "loosing", and their actions being mirrored in heaven. This language is a bit unnatural to us, but the word "bind" means something more like "forbid", and "loose" means something more like "allow". Jesus is telling the disciples to trust their judgement of what is, and is not, sin because God will uphold their judgement in heaven.

I think verse 20 is the key verse to help us understand this idea, though.

Matthew 18:20 - For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them. (NIV)

This verse sounds nice when taken in isolation, and I have often heard it used as a general encouragement about gathering together as believers. I have even used this verse myself to justify the value of a small

gathering of believers! However, when read within this context of seeking reconciliation to deal with sin, it takes on a slightly different meaning.

Jesus mentions "two or three" gathering, which is the same as the "two or three" witnesses that he mentions in verse 16. These are both a reference back to Deuteronomy, where Moses established the standard for legal testimony for the Old Testament people of God. In Deuteronomy 19 it says:

Deuteronomy 19:15 *One witness is not enough to convict anyone accused of any crime or offense they may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. (NIV)*

Jesus has picked up on this legal requirement and repurposed it here. Whereas the Old Testament law was established to ensure that God's people prioritised and valued *justice* amongst God's people, Jesus is picking up on it, and repurposing it, to ensure that the New Testament people of God prioritise and value *reconciliation*.

Verse 20 is almost like Jesus is saying "where two or three of you gather, the judge is present and court is in session". Jesus is promising the disciples, and us, that he will be with us as we make judgements about sin, and he expects that we'll do so as he does - seeking reconciliation.

We can look to Jesus to see the ultimate example of one seeking reconciliation while confronting sin. Jesus chose to suffer extreme personal loss in order to deal with sin and make it possible for people to be reconciled to God. When Jesus promises his presence as we deal with sin, he is showing us that through his power *everyone* can be reconciled to God, and to his people.

It's important that we read these verses as a part of this passage of Matthew, because it is very easy to misinterpret them we separate the individual verse from its context. These are not universal promises that Jesus is making, but rather promises made within the specific framing of pursuing reconciliation in the face of sin.

Jesus promises us that he is with us as we confront sin. Through his power, we are able to confront sin, and to reconcile people.

Conclusion

This then brings us back to our original question: how do you respond when people do the wrong thing? How *should* we respond when our Christian brothers and sisters sin?

In today's passage we have seen that we should deal with sin by seeking reconciliation in Jesus' power.