

MATTHEW 18:15-20
ST JOHN'S; 10.9.17; 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION: IF YOUR BROTHER SINS (AGAINST YOU) . . .

This passage from Matthew's gospel challenges us to ask ourselves, 'What do I do when someone offends or upsets me?' Too often, we jump straight to the end of Jesus' instructions, and treat someone who's upset us *as though he were a pagan or a tax-collector* (v 17). But Jesus didn't mean us to ignore most of what he said! Treating a fellow-Christian as *a pagan or a tax-collector* is the last resort. First, Jesus says, we're to do everything in our power to resolve the issue which has upset or offended us.

POINT OUT THE FAULT

When someone offends or upsets us, we actually have several options as to what to do about it. We could simply refuse to speak to the other person. Or we could bad mouth them, and try to get everyone else in the congregation to take sides in the argument. We could have a very public row with them. Or, slightly more constructively, we could write them a letter, explaining how they've upset us.

But Jesus insists that the first thing we're to do if someone offends or upsets us, is to *speak to the person: go to him and show him his fault . . . privately, just between yourselves* (v 15). That way, no-one else becomes involved, or even aware that you've had a disagreement. The issue can be aired between the people concerned, misunderstandings quickly cleared up, and if both people are prepared to listen to each other, it can be resolved with no drama, no tension, no public scene.

IF YOU ARE NOT LISTENED TO . . .

Jesus goes on to describe what action we should take *if* [our brother] *will not listen to us* (v 16). The various stages are all aimed at resolving the issue with as few people involved as possible. We only involve more people if the offender refuses to listen. I won't go through the various stages; Jesus describes them very clearly.

The point, or aim, of this process is to try to persuade the offender to *listen to his fellow Christians*. Immediately before this passage in Matthew's gospel is the parable of the lost sheep, the story of the shepherd who searches everywhere for one sheep who has strayed. So the context of today's passage is pastoral care. We probably don't think of pointing out people's faults when 'pastoral care' is mentioned. But when individual Christians and the church as a whole search out and rescue fellow believers who've gone astray, and seek to regain them as brothers or sisters in Christ, that's pastoral care in action.

We need to be careful that we're not being judgmental or hypocritical as we point out people's faults. We're to do so in a caring and prayerful way. We're not seeking to condemn our brothers and sisters in Christ; we're seeking to restore them to full fellowship with the Lord. We're all sinners. But we all have different blind spots, especially when it comes to our own behaviour.

IF SOMEONE POINTS OUT MY FAULTS . . .

So this passage also challenges us to ask ourselves, 'What do I do if someone comes to me and points out my faults?' Again, there are several possible ways of dealing with it. We could take umbrage,

refuse to listen, and never speak to that person again. Of course, they might then come back with two or three other people in tow! We could put on a show of smiling, and pretending to agree with them, but then ignore their advice, and tell the rest of the church what an interfering busybody that person is. If that's how we respond to a fellow Christian who lovingly and graciously points out our faults, then we're throwing their love and care back in their face, and adding to the gossip and backbiting which all too often marks the life of our churches.

On the other hand, we could listen to what our friend has to say, and act on it. We should be grateful that they care for us enough to come and speak to us. 'Look, I've noticed that you've got really snappy lately. Is anything the matter?' We may have thought we were hiding our worry very nobly, but this gives us the opportunity to talk over the problem, and to realise that we've been taking our problems out on other people. Or maybe someone is kind enough to take us aside and say, 'I don't suppose you realise, but you never actually look at people when you're saying hello, and it makes them think you aren't interested in them'. It's easy to get offended when someone speaks to us like this; instead we should be thankful that we've been given the chance to put things right.

I realise that, in one sense, these examples are fairly trivial. But they illustrate the point that it's not too difficult gently and lovingly to point out someone's fault, as we try to help each other along in our Christian lives. Of course, the fault might be something much more painful and

difficult to talk about, but we're still called to love and care for each other enough to be 'up front' with each other.

TREAT HIM AS THOUGH HE WERE A PAGAN OR A TAX COLLECTOR

Jesus isn't condoning the way people ostracised pagans and tax collectors. It's a bit like when we talk about 'sending someone to Coventry' – it's an expression, it doesn't mean that we have anything against Coventry as a city!

This phrase is both realistic and hopeful. If we've lovingly and prayerfully been through the various stages which Jesus suggests here, trying to resolve an issue, and the other person has stubbornly and consistently refused to listen, then we have no choice. There can be no real Christian fellowship in these circumstances. The only thing we can do to try and lead them to repentance is to *treat them as though* [they] *were a pagan or a tax collector*; send them to Coventry; have nothing to do with them. It doesn't mean that we stop loving them, or that we stop praying for them. And when they do finally repent, we should join the angels in heaven in rejoicing.

PROHIBITING AND PERMITTING

I don't think that it's immediately obvious how the last few sentences in this passage relate to Jesus' instructions about how to deal with someone who offends or upsets us. *And so I tell all of you, what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven* (v18). Jesus has already told Peter this; here, he's talking to the whole group of disciples. What Jesus is

getting at is that the church as a whole does have the authority, under heaven, to have convictions about what is right behaviour and what is wrong behaviour. Individual Christians can't just behave any way they like, and expect the church to turn a blind eye. The church has God's authority to pronounce what is sin, and what is not sin. And so, in a case where a dispute has escalated, and the whole church is asked to try and make the offender listen, the whole church does have God's authority to tell an individual that their behaviour is unacceptable. Of course, the aim is still to restore the sinner, so the church must deal with them with great care and compassion, and much prayer.

CONCLUSION

This little passage gives us some very practical instructions about how to deal with disputes, disagreements and upsets within the church. If Christians always followed this process when a fellow member of the church had upset them, the church as a whole would be a much happier and more loving community. Jesus' command is that we love one another, as he has loved us (John 13:34). This is one way of working out our love for one another; helping each other to see our faults, and with God's help, to overcome them.

So next time someone offends us or upsets us, let's lovingly and prayerfully do as Jesus suggests, and *go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone*. I know that's scary. But if we want our congregation to be a church with a distinctive Christian fellowship, rather than a club which is little different to other clubs, we need to work hard on our relationships with one another, especially when those relationships are difficult.