

anxiety bitterness rage immorality  
slander hate idolatry malice selfishness  
deception complaining adultery jealousy

## **Matthew 18:15–17**

15 “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. 16 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.’ 17 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.

## **Reflection**

In Matthew chapters 18 to 21 Jesus is teaching his disciples and us about relationships within the church. The biggest risk to these relationships is of course sin. And so over the last few days Jesus has emphasized the seriousness of sin, how destructive and deadly it is within a Christian community and how we need to flee from it at all cost. He's used powerful imagery of millstones tied around necks and the amputation limbs; drowning and being maimed preferable to being cast into eternal fire. Sin is deadly serious. Jesus has made that very clear.

Today Jesus gets really practical in terms of how to deal with sin in a church context. Because sin doesn't just have personal consequences, it also tears communities and relationships apart. Not just our relationships with God but also our relationships with each other. Sin's like a black hole that can suck everything in. Like a cancer that can spread throughout a church. And worst of all sin has a way of blinding us, making us oblivious to its very existence. That's where our Christian brothers and sisters come in says Jesus in our passage today.

In Matt 18:15–17 Jesus gives us four practical steps to help restore a Christian brother or sister back into right relationship with God and with the people that they've hurt within their church. He gives

us four steps to deal with sin and to bring about reconciliation in the church.

The first step is found in verse 15,

15 “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.

As children of God we're brothers and sisters which means we share an even deeper bond than flesh and blood family. We love each other. And that means sometimes it's necessary to go beyond the bounds of polite friendship for the sake of this love. It can even mean risking the relationship for the good of your friend, and also for the good of your church, your wider family made up of all your brothers and sis-

ters. But when you do so be gentle and keep it private says Jesus. If your brother or sister is sinning in a repeated way that is hurting you, themselves, and has the potential to hurt others, don't pretend not to notice, don't take the easy way out and ignore what's going on – take it up with them urges Jesus. But do so gently, privately, and above all humbly; just one sinner helping another who'll no doubt return the favour one day soon.

But if it doesn't go well, then the second step is this:

16 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.'

Out of love and concern – and never out of bitterness and hurt, although sometimes it can be really hard to keep these emotions in check – the next step is to involve one or two others. If you've failed to convict the person privately then, according to Deut 19:15 which Jesus quotes in this verse, bring along two or three witnesses. But this isn't about winning an argument, or finding people who'll take your side; it's about restoring a brother or sister who's straying in their faith. And this takes great wisdom. Who to ask along? A neutral third party? Someone the person deeply respects? A mutual friend? Your minister or a trained Christian counsellor who's also a member of your church? Whoever you approach, be wise, pray deeply beforehand, and again keep it private, just be-

tween the two or three of you.

And yet if the person still persists in this sin, in a repeated and unrepentant way, then Jesus gives us this third step. From verse 17,

17 If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church;

I think it's important here to remember that in New Testament times, communities of believers were much smaller. They didn't have huge buildings, more often than not they met in people's houses in small house churches. So again, we need great wisdom in following this third step. What's clear is that Jesus is teaching us to escalate the matter. Involve more people. Together, urge and plead with your broth-

er or sister to repent of this sin and turn back to God. I don't think this means making an announcement in front of the entire church on a Sunday morning; except perhaps in the most extreme of cases, the kind of case you'd also report to the police. What I do think it means is to expand the circle so that you have an even greater chance of restoring the person. But in taking this step you're also beginning to think about the potential wider damage to your church of appearing to condone this sin by not speaking out or acting. Perhaps it's adultery, or damaging and malicious gossip, or another sin of a highly divisive nature. Satan loves to use these types of sins to tear churches apart which means sometimes it's appropriate to bring them to light for the good of both the person and the church.



Jesus's fourth step, the last resort if all else fails, is to then to treat the person as an unbeliever, as an outsider. But remember that again, this is done out of love. Feeling excluded is one of the worst feelings that we can experience as human beings. And this may be exactly what is needed to finally break through. But again, we need great wisdom here. Unbelievers are welcome in our churches, in fact, they're what we're all about and so to treat someone as an unbeliever may not be to completely cut them off. But there must still be a strong element of exclusion here; in the desperate hope that your former brother or sister will turn and repent of their persistent sin. A sin that has not only shipwrecked their faith but also has run the risk of damaging the faith of others in your church.

# Think

This is a complex matter so it's important that you take some time now to think over it for yourself. Perhaps run some scenarios in your mind. No-one likes confrontation. It's so much easier to ignore or avoid the matter and pretend that nothing is wrong. And sometimes not intervening is the wise and gracious course of action. Sometimes the matter is small. It might hurt, but in wisdom you choose to pray for the person, and be as gracious and loving as you can to them until God changes their heart. But other times ignoring their sin is not only being unloving to the person, it's also being disobedient to Jesus.

On the other side of the coin, one day you

may be the person who is approached. It's happened to me several times, sometimes rightly and sometimes wrongly. How will you react on that day? When a brave person approaches you in love seeking to help you to be more like Jesus? Or when a Christian brother or sister misinterprets these verses, and your behaviour, and speaks to you in a way that isn't honouring to Jesus? How will you show them grace in that moment by the way you react?

## **Pray**

Why not close today by praying for your church. Pray for unity and Christlikeness. But also for obedience and the courage to speak up when a brother or sister persists in a damaging sin. Pray that God might give you the words to say so that later when

things are no longer so raw that person might come back and thank you with all their heart. Pray too for those that may have left the church because of this passage. Pray that by the grace of God they might be restored to him and also to us.