

Authority and Unity

Matthew 18:1-20 (focus verses 11-20)

VIP. I've sure you have seen and heard this abbreviation many times. Very Important Person. At the opening of the new Spruce Hill Church yesterday, I decided to sit with my family in the wonderful new balcony they had built. The only trouble was that they had reserved me a seat at the front with the VIPs which was next to the local MP and the mayor! I was supposed to be a VIP!

The story is told of a famous opera singer called Pierre Monteau who wanted a hotel room in New York. He was told by the desk clerk that the hotel was full and just as he was due to leave he was recognised by the manager who offered him a room. "I'm sorry Mr Monteau", he said, "we did not realise you were somebody". To which Monteau replied "My dear sir, everybody is somebody".

I came across this passage afresh a few months ago and realise that we know and use bits of it but never look at the passage as a whole. We know the bit about the lost sheep or where two or three are gathered together. They look like a mix of items but they were said and written together. So why do we separate them? probably because preachers find this as difficult passage in some places and only pick out the morsels they can cope with, or they think their congregations can cope with. What we find when we take this passage as a whole is very challenging and that is what I'm going to try to suggest to you tonight.

We are VIPs to the Father - very important persons. You'll remember I preached on Mark's version of this before Easter. The disciples are arguing about who is greatest in the kingdom. Matthew gives us more detail in this passage. We see how Jesus uses the picture of a little child to show what greatness is in the kingdom of God. In verses 2 to 10 we hear dire warnings on what happens to those who discourage "little ones" - the young in the faith or the little ones God has given us to teach and encourage into His kingdom - and who cause them to sin. The warnings are dire not just because God hates us sinning (hence the verses about plucking your eye out), but is angry at those who cause others to sin and lead them astray. The Father in heaven is like an earthly parent - He does not like to see His children fall away.

Which brings us to our focus verses and Jesus follows the bit about the little ones falling away by the parable of the Good Shepherd. We invariably use it evangelistically and I don't think there is anything wrong with this, but in the context of this passage you'll see it is in the context of the Father not wanting to see any one of His get lost. Lost here I don't think is referring to eternal loss (remember the Bible is not a theological textbook so that every word you see does not necessarily have a theological meaning, or if it does, that the meaning is uniform). This is about going astray - falling away, backsliding, going off the rails. That's why in the immediate preceding verses there are warnings about causing the little ones to sin. The Father always hunts out the lost sheep, but He'd prefer they weren't lost in the first place.

The Father does not like His sheep to go astray and always seeks them out. This parable tempers the following verses. If the Father does not like His sheep going astray, then the disciples should not tolerate it either and act in a way that does not discourage them. We read of not causing them to sin or maybe to be a good role model by not tolerating sin in our own lives. In verses 15-20 we are encouraged to make sure that our brothers and sisters in Christ are not lost to us by breakdowns in relationships. Look at Verse 14 again *14 In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. 15 "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he 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 he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*

Jesus has not changed tack. It's the same subject. If your brother sins against you - sort it out, win him over. By the time you get beyond this passage, we are into how often we forgive our brother. Why? Because *your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.*

The problem is that people often expound on this passage out of its context which brings forth bad interpretations.. Taking it in isolation is the legalists way. They say - this is a rule for discipline in the Church. If there is sin unresolved then we take a couple of people and confront them and if they don't repent then we throw them out of the church. I have read stuff from the Roman Catholics to the Brethren on this one. All of it is about the process of exclusion. I'm not against church discipline and as we read a letter like 1 Corinthians we see a case for discipline in a church out of control.

But look at the context of the passage again verse 14 *your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost*. The information given by Jesus at its most basic is good advice. You've got a problem with someone - sort it out! Why? Because God does not like the little ones to be lost and the best way to deal with any situation is to win your brother over. The AV says, if you do this you've gained a brother - that's the idea.

And that's the basic concept of dealing with disputes in the Bible. Communicate. Most problems in churches go out of control because people don't communicate. The take affront at something, offence is caused and it is not resolved and it eventually becomes entrenched. You've not won a brother, but may be the architect of people being discouraged. In fact when older Christians are in unresolved dispute, others follow - and little ones are caused to sin. Offence causes alienation and the Father is ANGRY at those Christians who place themselves in unresolved dispute.

Do you have a problem with someone in this Church - resolve it! Win a brother - or sister! MAKE YOUR PEACE.

What if that fails? Take a couple of witnesses with you. Why? So we can hang them? In the context of verse 14 it is so that we can win them over. The word used for witness here is the Greek *martus* from which we get the word martyr. It's a legal word. They are there to listen to the facts - to intercede. Why? So that in the context of verse 14 we can win them over. Besides, witnesses to the facts are important. Why has my brother sinned against me? Perhaps it is because I have sinned against him! The testimony of two or three are important because they can act as mediators or peacemakers. The purpose is surely for reconciliation. This passage is about the two or three. And there's more to this as we shall see in a minute.

The last resort is to take them before the church and air the dispute there. The passage isn't clear whether Jesus is using the Greek *ekklesia* here in terms of the church because it is used of any assembly and could mean taking them to law as the Corinthians did to each other. I believe that disputes should never get as far as church meetings. If sin is not repented of long before that the church has failed. We've certainly not failed in that since I've been here but we must be on our guard. The Father *is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost*. If anyone falls out of membership or stops coming because they cannot accept their sin and repent, or is discouraged because of others then we have failed them and failed ourselves. Our role as a Church is to do the Father's will.

In this passage though we see the significance of the two or three. Why take the two or three witnesses.

16 But if he 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 he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. 18 "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

Verses 19 and 20 are sandwiched in between the bit on reconciling with your brother and forgiveness. Why? Are these just odd sayings. Of course not. It is a clear statement that we have authority to deal with situations on earth and gives some meaning to verse 16 about two or three witnesses. How can two or three Christians have so much authority? Because where two or three are gathered together in His name - He's there. So when things are bound, He's part of the decision - it's in His name and he is the mover. This is the power of unity. We have a promise - He's there -so let's know that promise and know that in unity things can change - God responds to what we bind and loose on earth - but according to the will of Christ who is present with us. That's the significance of the witnesses - where two or three are gathered then the presence and will of Christ is part of our resolution of problems like in verse 16. Are you called to mediate? The power of two or three acting in unity is immensely powerful because when we gather in His name, Jesus is there.

So where are we? Our key verse *was your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost*. Our desire should be our Father's desire. We have the authority and the ability to make sure that does not happen. And in unity we can make things happen. One of the biggest problems in Norfolk in the wider Church is the disunity, barriers and hurt which runs deep in many circles amongst churches and ministers. They are barriers to moving onwards. Lack of forgiveness and unwillingness to win a brother blights the county. Yet that unity of two or three and the presence of Christ that goes with it can have a huge impact. It will break barriers, loosen shackles and bind up forces of darkness. All that Christians have to do is come together in the name of Christ, claim His presence and pray and act in His will.

This isn't ecumenism, but a true coming together of believers in Norfolk to do God's will, to build the kingdom and to intercede. I've networked with a number of believers, pastors and churches since coming to Norfolk. My desire is that will grow as we see God doing a new thing in Norfolk. It's already happening in some parts of the county. It's going to happen here but we need to be a people who are ready to win a brother and stand in unity in the presence of Christ.

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