



1. Matt 18:15-20

VIP. I've sure you have seen and heard this abbreviation many times. Very Important Person. I realised when I went to the Civic Service last Sunday that the place was full of VIPs: the Lord High Sheriff of Suffolk, mayors of various towns, Suffolk Coastal Council reps, leaders from the emergency services and other community leaders. Everybody who was somebody in Felixstowe and surrounding was there to celebrate the appointment of a new mayor. And there were plenty of other people there who weren't somebody - like me!

The story is told of a famous opera conductor called Pierre Monteux 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 Monteaux", he said, "we did not realise you were somebody". To which Monteaux replied "My dear sir, everybody is somebody".

In our world, we like to divide people up according to whether they are somebody or nobody and all points in between. And as our reading opened this morning, that's exactly what the disciples were discussing: who was greatest in the kingdom of heaven. That's the way of the world they thought, so that was going to be the way in God's kingdom.

And Jesus sits a child in front of them and says: *2 So Jesus called a child to come and stand in front of them, 3 and said, "I assure you that unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.*

Instant deflation! What is the characteristic of a small child; depends on their parents for food, clothes, a roof over their head, for training, for discipline and the rest. And that's what we need to be like: entirely dependant on our heavenly Father. What else does a parent do: teaches us how to relate to one another, values like caring, sharing, family loyalty are all part of a child's upbringing.

This morning we are going to look at a People of Unity and you may wonder why I chose this passage. Because this passage tells us how we should relate to one another as the children of God and being part of a family is about love, care, respect and loyalty. All these things build families up and they build up the church. But if we start thinking we are superior to others and have a right to treat others as we please then we quickly become a People of Disunity. What's sobering is before God, there are no VIPs in churches. We are all the same, even the Pastor, Elders and Leaders. We were just as equally lost, have been saved in the same way as everyone else, all depend equally on the Holy Spirit for our knowledge, power and wisdom and are only what we are because God has made us that way. It's true that God gives people authority as leaders in the church, but that is only to exercise His authority to serve the needs of the people of God, not for exploiting the needs of others for personal ends.

I am going to concentrate on verses 15 to 20 this morning but the preceding verses set the scene. Now having established that we need to become like children if we want to enter the kingdom of God, in verses 3 to 10 we hear dire warnings on what happens to those who discourage "little ones". Who are little ones? They are the children of verse 2 - the people of God - they are the people who have been made somebodies in Christ who we treat like nobodies and whom we discourage in their faith.

And we see how God is angry when we discourage others in their faith. Listen to this bit: **6** *"If anyone should cause one of these little ones to lose his faith in me, it would be better for that person to have a large millstone tied around his neck and be drowned in the deep sea. 7 How terrible for the world that there are things that make people lose their faith! Such things will always happen—but how terrible for the one who causes them!*

Ouch! Think carefully. Have we ever discouraged someone in their faith? I would like to think not but experience of life tells me that we've all offended, upset, insulted, patronised or discouraged another believer in our lives - and probably more than once. I've already come across people who once walked well in their faith as part of this Church, but for one reason or another were discouraged in their faith. Some no longer worship anywhere else. We may say "oh, they had problems", or "that was their choice", or "they are responsible for falling away". In one sense true but but look at the passage **7** *How terrible for the world that there are things that make people lose their faith! Such things will always happen—but how terrible for the one who causes them!*

This is not just a matter of personal responsibility of individuals, but our responsibility as a church. I know some of you have explored the wounded history of the church. But it's one thing to think about wounded history 200 years ago when we have good friendships with St Mary's now, or even harking back to damaged relationships with issues that may have happened a couple of decades ago. But what about people who have fallen away in recent years. What about them?

Then look at this verse again. God is burning angry at His people who discourage others. Look at God's word and take it seriously!

What should we do? Repent. Simple as that, seek the Lord's forgiveness and then get them back. In verses 10-14 we get this parable - it's the Parable of the Good Shepherd.

10 : *See that you don't despise any of these little ones. Their angels in heaven, I tell you, are always in the presence of my Father in heaven. 12 "What do you think a man does who has one hundred sheep and one of them gets lost? He will leave the other ninety-nine grazing on the hillside and go and look for the lost sheep. 13 When he finds it, I tell you, he feels far happier over this one sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not get lost. 14 In just the same way your Father in heaven does not want any of these little ones to be lost.*

Of course, we always get the picture of Jesus carrying the lost sheep when we think of this. It's a great picture of Jesus when we read John's Gospel, but that isn't what Jesus is talking about here. It's a simpler message - if you are responsible for losing a sheep from your fold, then make every effort to get him or her back. Repair the damage you've caused! Better still, don't cause the damage in the first place!

Let's go down to verse 15. How do people become discouraged in a church? Invariably because someone offends them. And the thing is, that I'd say 99% of all arguments in churches usually have absolutely nothing to do with matters of faith and doctrine (although people spiritualise them usually in order to justify themselves). They are usually more to do with personalities and straight selfishness. In fact, whenever I find older Christians are in unresolved dispute, younger, weaker believers follow - and little ones are caused to sin. Offence causes alienation and the Father is ANGRY at those Christians who place themselves in unforgiven, unresolved dispute. I've already preached on that this year.

Now verses 15-20 are passages that are frequently used in a number of contexts, but perhaps most people shy away from what they most obviously say - but if we take them seriously I believe, and use them as a model for our own relationships in our church, we will find that God will make us one in His body and our church will

grow - and we will see unity and harmony in the fellowship.

So let's look at verse 15: *"If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back."*

Straightforward. But you may think "he's offended me, why should I make an effort to go and deal with the issue. It's his fault."

Well, once you go past verse 20 you'll find the reason why. I preached on verses 21 onwards a few months back. If you don't remember it, I'll sum it up in a single verse which means just what it says - Matthew 6:14-15 *"If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done."*

This is a passage about forgiving and being prepared to forgive - if your brother sins against you - do something about it - attempt to win him back. Why? Because we aren't in the business of losing people, but winning them back!

Win them back!

◆ Winning back always starts as a private matter

In fact this passage is the ultimate in wisdom regarding personal disputes - no surprise as the words were uttered by Jesus. As a Pastor, people often come up to me and say "so and so has done this, she has offended me in this way, he has upset me". The implication is that they want me to do something about it. What does the scripture say. *"If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back."* Simple eh? You'll be surprised how arguments in churches have raged for years because someone would not be forgiving enough to have just gone up to their brother or sister in Christ and won them back when the problem happened in the first place.

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. Someone take affront at something, offence is caused and it is not resolved and it eventually becomes entrenched. They've not won a brother, and may be the architect of many people being discouraged as people take sides.

Don't short cut the Word of God by making a private matter a public matter because that's irresponsible and causes discouragement to others. Let's be adults. You'll find I'll always encourage people who have gripes about another member of the church that they first go and sort it out in a spirit of peace, love and forgiveness. That's the only way I believe is acceptable to God.

But what if we don't quite get there and my brother or sister doesn't listen?

◆ Winning back may involve the help of others

6 But if he will not listen to you, take one or two other persons with you, so that "every accusation may be upheld by the testimony of two or more witnesses," as the scripture says.

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 - and to intercede. Why? So that in the context of verse 14 we can win them back. 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.

What if he doesn't listen to reasonable intercession.

◆ Winning back involves the church in extreme cases

17 And if he will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church. Finally, if he will not listen to the church, treat him as though he were a pagan or a tax collector.

The last resort is to take them before the church and air the dispute there and ask the church to intercede. 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. Most commentators take it to mean the church and that asking the church to become involved in a dispute between Christians is the place of last resort. In our church, let's make it the place of absolute last resort. It would be my desire as a Pastor, that I would never have to intercede in disputes between people in the church because we are all capable enough and loving enough as a fellowship to deal with our relationships before they ever get as far as a Leadership or Church Meeting.

The end bit sounds a bit drastic doesn't it? ***Finally, if he will not listen to the church, treat him as though he were a pagan or a tax collector.*** Traditionally, more extreme miscreants have been disciplined or excommunicated. If you've read our own church history, the discipline of withdrawal of membership was used generously in the early years of the church. If people do not accept the authority of God and His word which is our duty as a church to discern, then it is right to withdraw membership - but treating them as pagans and tax collectors does not mean that we abandon people.

How did Jesus treat pagans and tax collectors? He showed them compassion. He showed them that forgiveness and acceptance was what He was about and that they should seek this and follow Him. And when they did, He welcomed them. That's the Jesus way. But this is an extreme case. My desire is that we be such a loving and well-balanced church, that we never have to look too hard at verse 17.

We are not called to disunity, but unity and some of the most powerful verses follow because they are what happens when the people of God act in unity and agreement.

18 "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. 19 "And I tell you more: whenever two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them."

All the "yous" here are in the plural. This is what happens when the people of God act together. Look at the words. They are incredible. Meditate on them because they are what they say.

Before anyone suggests we get together and agree on earth that each church member gets a Ferrari, there's something else here. Look at verse ***20 For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them.*** It's not just a case of gaining a unity by loving and respecting one another and dealing properly with one another, it's an agreement gained by Jesus being part of our agreement and our prayer. You'll remember that if we have no agreement with the brother that we get hold of a couple of witnesses to determine truth and find agreement. Well the picture is the same here, we come together in the presence of Jesus to determine His will and His way and agree in it. When it's His will and His way, what we agree on earth IS done in heaven and whatever we ask the Father is done because it's been done because we as the church of God have got together to pray, to discern the will of Jesus who promises to be with us when we do so.

Why do you think I see our priority as prayer as we contemplate our future. I've

said it before and I'll say it again: the most powerful experiences I have had of God has been in prayer meeting where people have got together to listen to Jesus and seek His will and way.

So, let's cast off those attitudes and ways that cause disunity, let's rebuild friendships that have been stretched or broken. Let's win our brother or sister back. Do it. Do it now. If they are here, don't leave the building until you have started to deal with it. If not, deal with it soon. Don't let your discouragement by them, or your discouragement of others, your unforgiveness or whatever damage your relationship with God too and mar the fellowship of God's people: deal with it!

And prepare for action. We need to pray more together as a church and learn to listen to God. If we want to build the church of God, it all starts as we listen to the voice of Jesus.

Let's pray.

*Preached by Mark Reid
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