



Matthew 18:15-20

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

TITLE

My strongest memory of this song isn't anything to do with love or marriage but a wind up gramophone that belonged to our neighbours in Cardiff and their children found fascinating. Even by the 60s, we found something that you wound up and needed no batteries to us just amazing.

The song itself is about things that belong together – the implication being that certain things or people, when working together are more effective than just the individual. For those of us who have been married a long time, we find that we can't do without our "other half". Have you ever tried using a carriage without a horse? Chips taste nice, so does fish – but there's something about the combination. The same is true of strawberries and cream. And there are just some things in life that require a team.

Why do I say all this? Because God did not create us to be solitary beings – human beings are social animals. Individuality can be very important and we celebrate great men and women. But look at our modern society around us and never mind how great the achievements of individuals in science, engineering, commerce, politics, art; what is around us that's man-made has got there because people worked together with these ideas to bring them into reality.

WE WERE ALL IMMersed

The same is true of the church. As much as it's important to talk about personal faith, holiness or prayer, the main vehicle God has given us to grow is the church (1 Cor 12:13 We were all immersed by one Spirit into one body). We've been made part of one another and we only grow properly when we grow together. Without fellowship and being part of the body – part of church – Christians don't thrive.

THE LONE RANGER

Which is where I come to prayer. We often envisage prayer as a mainly personal thing. We hear sermons about how we should cultivate our relationship with God. I know – because my last few sermons on prayer have just done that. But prayer isn't merely a solitary pastime – it's something that's shared with the rest of the body of Christ. And like strawberries and cream, or fish and chips or husband and wife or the Lone Ranger and Tonto, we don't realise the potential of our prayer lives without praying with one another. Personal prayer and praying with others go together like a horse and carriage.

Individual prayer can be effective and it's a vital foundation - quote – but it's in the realm of corporate prayer that it's possible to see changes in societies and nations. We may not be able to make a difference ourselves, but the church of God at prayer, walking with the Spirit and moving in the Spirit can be truly world-changing. We'll explore that in a moment and I'm sure that Rachel Hickson will also explore that one with us next weekend.

But let me start closer to home. Praying with one another is as important as praying ourselves, particularly as we seek to discern the voice of God. There is a reason for that: it gives us less opportunity to mishear. As a pastor I've often been confronted by people who have said "Jesus has told me this...." and taken action on that basis. But as I've heard what they say it's lead me to say "are you sure?" Sharing with others is the way by which we can discern what is coming from God or our own wishful thinking or misunderstanding. Other people praying confirm prophetic words – or at least they know where to check it in the Bible!

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TWO AND THREE

The passage we read in Matthew shows us the importance of the two and three. As you know, we walk with the Spirit in us daily, but it's when we meet together in twos or threes or more that Jesus has promised to be with us. Actually, for the Jews there needed to be a quorum of 12 for worship in the synagogue. But for Christians it's just two. As we meet together, we can claim this promise: "For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them." Now you can see where corporate prayer, or for that matter corporate worship is so important – because Jesus promises to be with us, part of us. If it's in His name, we can guarantee His presence.

How often are we conscious of that. I know we all know the scripture. But we are gathered in His name now – that means He's present. He was present at the table, He was present as we sung. He was present as we prayed. He's present as we're listening to this. Challenging isn't it?

VERSES 15-17

We are given two perspectives on Jesus being with the two or three here. First of all the verses from 15-17 which deals with disputes. *"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. 16 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. 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.*

It's the foundation of all behaviour in the church – actually it's our church policy. If people followed what was said here than churches would be kinder places. Often hurt is caused because when people are offended, they tell the world and his dog about it, rather than speak to, and try and win over the person that has offended them.

Has someone offended you or otherwise sinned against you. Then speak to them. Speak only to them and try to win them over. Those are the words of Jesus. You'll find that if you come to me complaining about your brother or sister in Christ, expecting me to sort them out then the question will always be – have you spoken to them?

VERSE 20

But if that fails then the power of the two or three comes into play. You speak to them in the presence of witnesses. By witnesses Jesus means witnesses. He's talking about them in the context of verse 20 which anchors this group of verses. What do the witnesses do in a dispute between believers – they come in the name of Jesus; to bring the mind and presence of Christ. If you're ever asked to perform this task when there is a dispute, make sure that you are recognising the presence of Christ – He's there. He promises to be there and you then act in His will.

It's only after this has all been done that the church is involved as a whole. That's the last stage in the process. We never make our personal disputes with people a matter for the church to discuss before you've been through the first two steps and the offending person has rejected the counsel of the two or three who have brought the presence of Jesus to bear on the situation.

I digress for the purpose of drawing to our attention of the importance of the two or three. The second point in these verses is this: "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."

Why do we pray corporately. Because when corporate prayer is taken seriously and we pray in the context of a present Christ who directs us in His mind and will, then we pray – speak – with authority and our words become world changing. It's a staggering couple of verses.

JONATHAN EDWARDS

Do they happen? Yes – when Christians take them seriously. How do I know? Let me give you a couple of examples. In 1741 a New England preacher called Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon called "Sinners in the hands of an angry God". In it amongst other things, he suggested that when God's people come together with one mind to pray for the revival of God's church, things happen – and in a big way". The sermon was published in a pamphlet and Christians in Scotland in 1744 started a concerted attempt to do just that – in fact they called it Concerts of Prayer. Within a decade revival was sweeping Britain and the USA. Interestingly, half a century later, that same pamphlet was read by a new generation of Christian leaders in the Baptist Churches, which triggered a second Awakening and the start of the modern missionary movement. Corporate prayer makes a difference.

PRAY HARINGEY

On a more contemporary note, my first contact with London in the 80s was in Tottenham. It was a place where the church struggled and had a low state. But in the mid-90s, a few Pastors got together and covenanted to pray regularly and encourage other pastors and their churches to do the same. Prayer Haringey was born. By 1996 the majority of churches in Haringey were involved. It was a revival based group, seeking to see the kingdom extended and the society in Haringey changed. The effect was astounding. From the handful of alive churches, hundreds of churches started to appear. It's one of the most Christian parts of London now. But society changed there too. Why. Because people decided to pray and make things agreed on earth be agreed in heaven as promised.

WHY DON'T WE?

So if this scripture is true, then why don't we pray more? Rachel Hickson - *whilst it is important for each of us to develop a vital one to one prayer relationship with God, corporate prayer must also be a fundamental part of healthy church life.* (p 134) The problem is that prayer meetings are often the most missable services? It isn't something we prioritise. We know that people like Spurgeon said that the prayer meeting is the engine room of the church. Prayer meetings have the potential to be the most exciting encounters with God we can have but yet they can be dull and boring.

REASONS

Dry, boring, not my thing, don't know how to pray.

We don't see the advantage in doing so for whatever reasons. It's a kind of spiritual madness that our human minds indulges in. Whether the prayer is personal or corporate, we all need it, like our bodies need water. We need the Holy Spirit to open up our minds to convince us of this spiritual truth, we have a Father in heaven who desires to speak with us, as individuals and together. But what about us?

If you feel that praying with others isn't for you, then know that the word of God shows us that it is for you. Know and be encouraged by the benefit of prayer. If you've not prayed with others before or much with others before then how do I start? Try in 2s, 3s or 4s with people you know and gain confidence there. Not all of us are called to speak or pray to large groups. You have to start somewhere. Here's what Rachel Hickson says about the value of praying together. *If you learn to pray together with others you will be stretched to listen to the broader sound of God's heart for His people.*

So how do we pray? Just talk to God just as you would talk to a close friend or relative – He is our Father after all. There's no special language, posture, format, place. Whatever you feel most comfortable with. We've become so accustomed to a very narrow way of addressing God – sitting in a seat, speaking quietly into our laps.

RACHEL HICKSON

Rachel Hickson is coming next Saturday and Sunday. She's coming to encourage us. To show us that prayer is relevant, dynamic, exciting and will help us to see how it changes lives and situations today. Come, be excited, be challenged and be encouraged by what God wants to say to us through this ministry.

*Preached by Mark Reid
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Do look at the book *Supernatural Communication*, by Rachel Hickson