

Lost Sibling (Matthew 18:15-20)

How do you help a fellow Christian who is caught up in a serious sin, perhaps even one that is harming you? Jesus lays out some practical teaching based on some key principles...

Snitching on my neighbour?

In the news this week there has been a debate about whether we should report our neighbours if they are breaking the 'Rule of Six'. It's a difficult question and one that government ministers have struggled to give a straightforward answer to!

In our passage today, Jesus tackles a similar dilemma.

If you look at verse 15 it says:

"If your brother or sister sins..."

or in some versions:

"If you brother or sister sins against you..."

It is not clear which is the correct version, but in a way it does not matter, because the advice Jesus gives is relevant to a situation either where you are personally sinned against or where you become aware of a fellow Christian's serious or repeated sin and know you are the best person to deal with it.

In fact if you discover that a fellow Christian is breaking the rule of six, you may want to tackle it because you are concerned that they are sinning or you might feel that they are part of the spread of the virus and so actually it is a sin against you! Either way the way to go about talking to your Christian brother or sister about it will need to follow the wisdom of Jesus!

As we will see the wisdom is deeply practical and we will look at a detailed practical response, but it is also based on some key principles. Our practice must always stem from our principles and whereas each situation might vary and demand a different practical response our principles should remain rooted in our faith.

So what are the three key principles?

Three Key Principles:

1. **Christian Profit: +1** -

The first principle is Christian profit.

As we all know if you run a business you have to aim to make money or you will go bust. In fact most businesses aim to make as much profit as possible!

But the church is not a business. Although we do have to make sure we pay our way our fundamental aim is not to make money, but to win people for Christ, to save souls for eternity.

So, Jesus tells his first disciples whose business was to catch fish, that they are now going to catch men. Paul says of his work of trying to persuade people to become Christians:

"Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. " (1 Corinthians 9:19)

Peter told wives:

"Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives," (1 Peter 3:1)

As a church we want to win people for Christ, our profit margin is seeing people become Christians, coming to faith in Christ so that they too share the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

And that is close to what Jesus is talking about in verse 15, except 'winning' here is not about conversion, because they are already a brother or sister in Christ, it is about rescue from wandering off. It is about turning them back from a serious sin so that they are safely in the church and can continue with their faith.

This follows on from what Jesus has just been teaching in last week's passage. Just as a shepherd puts everything into finding the lost sheep, so God does not want anyone to fall away from faith. If Jesus came to die to save our fellow Christians from sin, if he made such a massive investment in their salvation, then surely if we see someone wandering off from faith because they are caught in some serious sin, then we must seek to do something about it.

Dealing with another's sin is not about me feeling self-righteous or trying to prove I'm right or they are wrong. It is not about me trying to challenge them because I have felt hurt or upset by what they are doing, it is about me seeking their salvation, helping them to avoid wandering off from the faith. It is about the good and salvation of the other.

This is Christian profit!

2. **Secret Service: 1 to 1**

The second principle is secret service. This also comes from verse 15. This service to the other of challenging them about their sin, must be done as secretly as possible. You are to approach them about it one to one, so that no-one else is involved and no-one else knows.

This is a gentle approach in line with much teaching about gentleness elsewhere in the New Testament:

"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently."
(Galatians 6:1)

Remember you are seeking to help the other person, not publicly shame them.

This is also really a commandment against gossip. We all find it so easy to talk to our friends or colleagues about what others have done wrong or to listen to other's gossip away. But, that is not the Christian way. Peter says,

"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8)

Approaching someone privately allows them to respond and be restored without worrying what everyone else is thinking about them. Helping people to deal with their sin should be a secret service.

3. **Authority in Community: 2 or 3**

The third principle is in a kind of tension with the second.

Although we are to act privately and individually in the first instance, we are not to act as though my individual viewpoint must be correct. For Christians, authority only comes with community agreement.

If we approach someone privately about their sin and they acknowledge they were in the wrong that is fantastic. You haven't relied on your individual authority, because you and they together become two in agreement!

But, if they don't agree with you, then you have to show them that it is not just you, but people generally that see the issue as a sin.

This idea of authority in community is expanded on in verses 18-20. Jesus seems to underline that the agreement of the community in Jesus's name has a binding power! Their decision is backed up with the authority of heaven.

Indeed, if two or three people pray in Jesus's name in agreement, then God will answer their prayer. In fact Jesus goes on to say that he is present with them!!

Although we often use this verse as an encouragement to pray together in small groups, I think the thrust is to push people away from an individualised faith. From thinking that I've got it all sown up, even when no other Christian agrees with me.

Jesus is saying, that in showing someone their sin you have to have the agreement of others and the church as a whole. And that must include agreement with the Bible, because the Bible is the distillation of what the apostles believed and taught and those are the people Jesus is talking to in this passage!

When you challenge someone about a sin, you need to be sure that you are acting not on your own authority, but on the authority of the apostles, as shown in the Bible and the authority of the wider community of Christians in the church.

The 10 Step Pragmatic Process (Flow chart):

So how do we put these key principles together as a way either of helping people with their sin or dealing with people who have hurt us. I want to give a step by step guide, but I hope you can see how it follows from the three principles and a clear understanding of this passage and wider Biblical teaching.

Step 1: Is this actually a sin? Sometimes we can think someone is sinning, but just because they are doing something that you personally disagree with does not mean it is actually a sin. Later in the process Jesus tells us that we might need the agreement of the whole church in showing someone their sin. Before you go any further ask yourself the question: would the church agree that this is a sin? Can I point to a place in the Bible where it clearly shows this to be a sin? If you cannot do that, then stop there and rethink your own attitudes on the issue.

Step 2: Is this sin damaging to them? We all sin regularly and it would be a very tiresome church if we were all constantly approaching people to point out one another's sins! No as we have seen 'love covers over a multitude of sins'. And what Jesus wants us to be about is winning back our brother or sister from the danger of falling away from faith. This process then is about either very serious one off sin, a damaging regular pattern of sin or a behaviour. Before anything else we need to ask is this sin damaging and if not, then it is probably best just left alone.

Step 3: Is this sin dangerous to others? In this passage Jesus envisages winning your brother or sister from a sin that will cause them to wander off. He is not really talking about a sin that maybe a serious danger to others. So, if you discover someone who is involved in something that may be a serious danger to others - like child sex abuse or perhaps holding a big wild party in the present climate of virus spread, then it is appropriate to go directly to the authorities so that the danger is removed for the wider community.

Step 4: Are you the person to challenge? Are you the person that should be dealing with this or is this not really anything to do with you? This is especially true of someone who is not a Christian and has no interest in the church. Remember Jesus is talking here about a brother or sister in Christ.

In Matthew 7, Jesus warns us not to throw pearls before swine in case they attack you.

If you have a bullying neighbour who holds a large wild party, which breaks the rule of six, then the best step is not to approach them yourself as Jesus is saying here. You are not that person and you might just get yourself beaten up!

But, if you know the other person well and they are a Christian then certainly you probably are the person God wants to go and talk to them about it - whether it be breaking 'the rule of six' or some other sin!

Step 5: Is this a problem for me? In Matthew 7, Jesus says before challenging someone about their sin you need to deal with your own. Don't try and take the speck out of your brother's eye when you have a log in your own! So, if you spot a sin in someone else that needs dealing with or that has hurt you, first ask yourself is this a problem for me as well?

It is always easy to see sins in others, but often they're just as much a problem for us and this moment of reflection may be God's chance to help you see your own sin and stop you from damaging yourself!

Step 6: Approach them one to one. All the above, I think covers the assumptions of what Jesus is envisaging in this passage. So, the next step is Jesus's first: approach them one to one.

Such a private approach, especially when done gently and with the purpose of helping your brother or sister in Christ, fully hopeful that this alone will be enough to resolve the situation will enable the person to respond without losing much face.

If they do then fantastic. It's a job well done!!

Step 7: Show them what the Bible says. If they don't listen to you with a simple gentle approach. Then take the apostles along with you! Show them where the Bible teaches that what they are doing is wrong. Make it clear this is not about what you think, it is about what God's word says!

If you can't do that, then ask for help from someone else or maybe you need to ask yourself again whether this really is a sin that needs dealing with.

Step 8: Take one or two others with you. Remember that Christian authority is rooted in community. If two or three approach in agreement, then Jesus is there with you.

The hope here is that when they see that other Christians think this is a serious issue they will see their need to repent for their sin, say sorry and seek help to change. Again if they do, fantastic this does not need to go any further!

Step 9: Take it to the church. The aim is really never to reach this point, but if you have to bring the wider Christian community in in some way - probably by having a representation of key leaders in the church, then the hope is that they will then see the true seriousness of their situation and be saved.

Step 10: Treat them as no longer a Christian. If they don't then they are lost. At least for now. You need to treat them as though they are not a Christian to show them the serious consequences of their sin.

Yet, even this is in the hope that being split off from the church, they will realise what they have lost, repent and turn back!

Conclusion:

Throughout all of this the principles remain. It needs to be done as privately as possible, but with the backing of the community of the church's authority.

This is about trying to help your brother or sister from not falling away because of a sin. It is about rescuing a lost sheep. It may be a process that takes care and wisdom, but if the result is Christian profit, then it is worth the care and effort!