

Tuesday, March 28, 2023
Season of Lent
Day 30

Matthew 18:15–20

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.

¹⁸ “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

¹⁹ “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

Reflection

Verse 20 is one of the classic texts that we take out of its context. Usually, we speak this verse to each other with warmth and comfort. Of course, when we read it in this context it is, in fact, about judgment. A topic that is fairly uncomfortable for us. Rightly so! The church has applied this passage in some very harmful ways, indeed. But, once again, we cannot simply lay it aside. We need to hear what Jesus is saying and figure out how to live it without destroying people. Perhaps verse 20 closes the section as a warning: our Lord Jesus is watching us who gather in his name so take care what you do and say!

Sin happens. In the body of Christ sin is never personal or private and, because sin is destructive for the individual and the group, sin is not allowed to continue. So, each of us has a responsibility to name sin when we see it; not in a judgmental, holier-than-thou way, but simply and truthfully. Once the sin is named, the sinner has the hope of repentance. This is the taken for granted response. However, it may be—and often is—that the sin itself arose from a hardness of heart and that same hardness will not allow repentance. Now witnesses are gathered; not in judgment but for the sake of freedom. This brother or sister has been taken captive once again to the power of sin. The hope is that the small group speaking the truth in love will break that hold and melt that heart.

The final step is to speak of it in the context of the gathered assembly of the church. This is where harm has been done. People forced to stand up and confess or exposed and driven out. Somehow the idea seemed to become, make the one who sinned a sinner so that we can expel the sinner and keep the church pure. That’s not what the text calls for! The church is the bride of Christ, made pure by his blood. Therefore, Paul can name those in the church at Corinth the saints, even though there was much sin at work there. It is precisely because we are now saints (holy ones) in Christ Jesus that we can reveal sin in our midst and deal with it fairly. When we name sin within the assembly we are confessing our sin to Christ with the hope of freedom (whatever you loose . . .). We are recipients of grace therefore we must be ambassadors of it too.

Now, it may be that the person will still not listen. His or her hardness of heart is too settled. What then? Treat them like a pagan or tax collector. And, how does Jesus treat such people? With the ongoing invitation to enter the kingdom through repentance. The very goal of this whole process. The true punishment for sin is the sin itself. To abandon someone to their sin after trying to free them from it is the appropriate response. Not because we desire them to suffer, but because we hope they will once again thirst for freedom and life. The relationship must be maintained (even as they’ve made themselves an outsider from the assembly) so that if and when they come to the point of repentance they might be received back into the body with the same open arms the father had for the prodigal son. We do have the authority to bind and loose, but it is always in Jesus’s name so it must be with Jesus’s aims. That is why we are reminded that he is there with us as we deal with sin in our midst.

Prayer

Lord, forgive us for the damage that we have done to people in your name. Help us to walk between the ditches of allowing sin to flourish in your body and treating people like they are lower than us. Let your grace reign in our hearts and in our assemblies. Remind us that you stand with us and that we will stand at your own judgment throne. Let us treat others with grace and truth as you do us. Amen.