

Eastwood Baptist (18/2/'18) **PEACEMAKING (3): Gently Restore**

Introduction Has a fellow Christian ever sinned against you? What did you do? Did you think of Jesus' words in Matthew 18? I suspect that you probably did, because these are well-known words. But did you act on them? If you didn't, I'm sure you stand alongside many Christians in this. We are often afraid. "What will happen if I act on Jesus' words?" we ask ourselves. "Will my fellow Christian listen to me, or just get angry?" "If I need help, will other Christians provide it?" But let's start from the position that Jesus didn't give bad advice, and come to Matthew 18:15-17 with a sincere desire to understand what Jesus said, and a sincere readiness to act on his words.

If Your Brother or Sister Sins against You (Matthew 18:15-17)

Before we look at the words which are most immediately relevant to this morning's sermon, let's look at their context. The parable of the lost sheep comes immediately before our passage, declaring the joy of heaven over one lost sinner who is found and saved. Jesus is telling us that he cares deeply for every person who has trusted him, and every person who is yet to trust him. He wants us to behave accordingly. Immediately after Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus speaks about the authority of his gathered people and his presence with his gathered people, thus authorising us to act in his name, especially when there is conflict between brothers and sisters in our fellowship. Then Peter comes with a question about forgiveness, about how often he has to forgive a brother who sins against him. In response Jesus tells the story of the unmerciful servant, teaching that God's mercy sets the pattern for our mercy, our forgiveness, toward one another. Jesus cares deeply about all his children and wants us to care as deeply for one another. This is the context in which we should read Matthew 18:15-17. **Read Matthew 18:15.** These words concern brothers and sisters in Christ. And they immediately concern occasions when one of us sins against another, but I am confident that the context of Jesus' deep concern for how we relate to one another directs us to apply them to any occasions of offence, even when sin is not involved. Most challenging here is Jesus' call to the one offended to be the one to go to the offender. We might think we are entitled to wait for the offender, or even to avoid the offender. But Jesus says "go". I think this is because the offender may not be prepared to take the initiative, and may even not realise he or she has offended. It is a great thing to win our brother or sister over. But Jesus knows that it doesn't always happen, so he provides a second step. **Read Matthew 18:16.** Jesus says not to give up, but to seek the help of other Christians, presumably chosen with care. I don't think we do this as often as we should, but it is a potentially fruitful step. Sometimes it makes a great difference, but not always. Again Jesus is aware of this possibility.

Read Matthew 18:17. The word for “church” here has the basic sense in Greek of assembly or gathering, so I am confident that Jesus is saying to go to the gathering of his people, which is why he says what he does in **v.20**. At this point we need to keep in mind that Jesus spoke at the beginning of sinning against one another. We should definitely be ready to take this action where there has been sin, but be cautious where there has not been. I would certainly be ready to do it if the offender refused to respond to the first two steps, but not if there had been some effort to engage with the process, even though it had broken down. When we do take this first step we need to reflect on the words “treat him as you would a pagan (literally, Gentile) or a tax collector”. We need to remember how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors. I understand it to mean that we are declaring the unrepentant offender to have placed himself or herself outside the fellowship of Christ’s people, but with the intention of winning him or her back. Finally there is the question, which Ken Sande helpfully raises, of whether there are circumstances where this three-step pattern can’t be followed. I believe that this is likely to apply in cases of clear power inequality and of abuse, and especially of the two combined. I think, however, that Christians have failed more often in failing to act in line with Jesus’ words than in applying them too widely. We have also often failed by applying Jesus’ words without Jesus’ love. We need to take action where there is sin and offence, but we also need to do it well. This brings us to our second passage.

Speaking the Truth in Love (Ephesians 4:11-16) I want to focus on the one phrase “speaking the truth in love”, but first let’s look at the context in which it occurs – **read Ephesians 4:11-16**. Paul is writing about the church being built up, so that all Christ’s people are unified and mature. He is writing about the body of Christ growing in the way Christ wants it to do, so that it functions as Christ wants it to do. Part of this right functioning is “speaking the truth in love”. Christ wants all of us who are part of his church to speak the truth in love. He doesn’t want us to excuse speaking harshly and destructively by saying that we are speaking the truth. And he doesn’t want us to excuse failure to speak the truth, particularly truth which is difficult to speak, by saying that our failure is motivated by love. Especially in situations of conflict, we need to be prepared to speak the truth but to speak it in love. When other people speak even unpalatable truth to us, we can usually tell whether they are doing it out of love or out of unloving motives, such as the desire to present themselves as superior to us. And when we hear the love, we are able to hear the truth. When we find ourselves in conflict, especially when we have been sinned against or otherwise offended, let us not avoid the offender but approach in love. Let us not be silent, but speak. Let us

Speak the truth in love. And let us speak with a loving purpose. This brings us to our last Scripture reference, which is just a single verse. **Read *Galatians 6:1***. When we see a brother or sister who has fallen into sin, even when it is not against us, our purpose should be to restore the brother or sister to the right way. But if we have been offended by that brother or sister it is particularly important that we seek their good, rather than taking pleasure in their failure. And Paul warns against feeling superior, urging us to watch ourselves, to be conscious of our own vulnerability to temptation. We are also much more likely to be helpful to a fellow Christian who has fallen into sin if we have this humble spirit.

Conclusion Finally, I suggest that you have another look at the leaflet which was made available two weeks ago, especially the inside pages. In these pages peacemaking responses to conflict are contrasted with unhelpful responses of escape (“peace-faking”) and attack (“peace-breaking”). Let us honour and imitate Jesus by being peacemakers, especially but not only within this church.