

Scandal In The Church

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[0 : 00] In our hearts to thy word, for Christ's sake. Amen. I want you to turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 18, and we're continuing on in the Gospel according to St. Matthew.

And there are certain sort of marks I want you to observe in our passing so that you can begin to see something of the pattern around which the Gospel has been written.

The 18th chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew is the beginning of the fourth discourse, teaching discourse, in the Gospel.

And it's built around five teaching discourses, and this is the fourth of them. And this section, chapter 18, is primarily addressed to the community of the Church of Christ.

And it deals primarily with scandal in the Church. And what you do about scandal in the Church, which is certainly a delightful topic on which most people are more expert than perhaps they ought to be.

[1 : 28] The way that it deals with scandal is that it talks about it a good deal. And certain scandals are created in the Church, and chapter 18 gives you instructions on how to deal with the scandals that arise in the Church.

And so, first of all, the whole chapter opens with the question of who is the greatest in the Kingdom. And Christ counters by saying, don't worry about who's the greatest, just worry about whether you're in there or whether you're not.

And that's his advice. And then it goes on in talking about that, to set a child in the midst and say, except you become as a little child.

And then it talks about offending or causing one of these little ones to sin. And that's what scandal is. That's the Greek word, causing to sin.

And it's that idea that happens, that if we cause another member of the congregation to sin, we have affected a scandal.

[2 : 44] scandal, not in the usual sense in which we talk about scandal. But scandal means we have deprived him of what belongs to him, or we have claimed, we have interfered with him receiving something of the spiritual inheritance that belongs to him.

And so we can cause this scandal to one another. And if you look further, you will find not only can you cause this scandal to other Christians, you can also cause it to yourself.

that if one of your members means that you don't inherit what belongs to you, that you miss what is coming to you in the kingdom, then you're better to cut off your hand or pluck out your eye, rather than to miss that inheritance which belongs to you.

Then in chapter 18 and verse 15, it talks about the specific scandal that I want you to look at today. And reading it then on page 18 in your blue Bibles, If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.

If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

[4 : 23] If he refuses to listen to three witnesses, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

So this is the scandal or the sin that is done between members of the congregation. And this is the focus that is dealt with in this passage.

If you turn back to Leviticus chapter 19 and verse 15, you'll see an interesting Old Testament precedent to this. And this is page 104 in your blue Bible.

Right at the beginning, page 104, where there are instructions being given to the community of Israel.

Chapter 19 and verse 15 of Leviticus says, You shall do no injustice in judgment.

[5 : 34] You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. You shall not go up and down as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand forth against the life of your neighbor.

I am the Lord. You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbor, lest you bear sin because of him.

You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

So that what I think it points out to us is this, that when somebody sins against you, which may have been at 9.30 yesterday morning, by 9.35 the person who sinned against you may have forgotten about it.

But since 9.35, yet 9.30 yesterday morning, you are continuing to harbor in your heart the hurt that was done to you.

[6 : 55] And Leviticus reminds us that we're not to go around doing that. Now, coming into any parent, one of the things that you find among a great many people is that in the course of their church life, they have been seriously hurt by a brother Christian.

Probably the person who did the hurt hasn't thought about it from that day till this. The person who has been hurt has continued to smolder with resentment from that day till this because it wasn't dealt with.

And one of the dangers is, you see, that what happens is that you build up a tremendous amount of hurt and resentment between members of the same community so that a lot of people won't even come to church because they have been badly hurt and they have never dealt with it.

And it's a terribly important thing to deal with. So important that if you look in Matthew, again, chapter 5 and verse 23, it gives you some very specific advice about how important it is to deal with this problem when a brother sins against you.

5.23 of Matthew on page 4 in the New Testament section says, If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, go first be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift.

[8 : 55] So that this business of putting this relationship right is a matter of paramount importance in the life of the congregation.

So important that your prayer life and your worship life and your communicant life as a Christian can be seriously interfered with if you don't deal with it.

There can be no, in a sense, vertical relationship working unless you're dealing constantly with these horizontal relationships between you and your brothers in Christ.

Now, there's another instance of this which is spoken of in 1 John, chapter 5 and verse 6. And this is page 224 in your pew Bible.

In your blue pew Bible. That's 1 John, chapter 5, verse 16. If anyone sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask God and God will give him life.

[10 : 09] For those whose sin is not mortal. There is a sin which is mortal. I do not say that one is to pray for that all long doing his sin. But there is a sin which is not mortal.

And so he says that one of the chief ministries that we have when we see a brother sin, whether it's against us or within the community, is to deal with it.

To deal with it in the first instance in personal terms. But remember that there are two parties dealing with it.

And it's a dangerous thing to deal with because the fact and possibility is that you might become very judgmental about it. So in order to guard against that, look at what Galatians has to say in the beginning of chapter 6.

And this is on page 180 in the New Testament section of your Blue Bible. It says there, chapter 6, verse 1, Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.

[11 : 25] Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. So that there's a great deal of emphasis put on this interrelationship between you and your brother, your fellow member.

And it would seem to me that it completely denies what we consider to be the chief function of being a Christian, and that is to let people hurt us and never say anything about it to them, knowing that God will justify us and damn them finally.

But that's not what's taught here. What's taught is that you are to take the occasion as the basis for establishing a new relationship with your brother.

Do you see what it says in Matthew 18, in verse 15? If we go back again to the text I started with, it says the result of doing this is that you can gain a great reward.

If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. So that in a very real sense, instead of this being the beginning of the breakdown, it's the beginning of an entirely new kind of relationship.

[12:50] So you're to be concerned for yourself, lest you be crippled by the resentment of having been sinned against. And you're to be concerned for your brother, that he may come to terms and be reconciled to you and to the Christian community.

Those are the chief concerns that mark this statement. But the difficulty is that when you go to talk to your brother and say, Brother, you have sinned against me and this is what you did, that you're sufficiently familiar with human reactions to know that he's liable to say to you, Don't be ridiculous. Or to say, Well, that may be your perspective, but it's not mine. And so instead of it being a reconciling activity, it might do a certain amount of continuing damage.

And in case that happens, there's a second line of defense that you're to bring with you, and that is two or three witnesses. And the witnesses are not there to reinforce your accusation.

They are there to reinforce the reality of your desire for forgiveness and for reconciliation. They are not there as a kind of sheriff's posse to help the sheriff make the arrest and the conviction.

[14:22] They are there as brothers in Christ to give assurance of love and forgiveness to make this real. Because one of the difficulties we have when we sin against a brother is that we expect a continuing focus of revenge to be inspired in the heart of the one we've sinned against.

That he will now continue to think of you in terms of paying you back for what you did to him. Instead of which you bring your brothers to tell him that what you want to do is not to seek revenge but to seek reconciliation and forgiveness to build that kind of relationship.

And that's between two members of a Christian community of a Christian congregation. The two or three witnesses are there to assure you that the road to reconciliation is wide open.

Well, if that fails you have one other line of action which you can take and that is it says that you can go to the church and again the function of the church is that the church is a forgiving community and the reality of the church is that it is the community in which you experience forgiveness a radical kind of forgiveness and you see it's the parody of the church that most people think that it's that it's a community where you become guilty.

You don't have to go to church to feel guilty. You can get it almost anywhere but you do have to go to church to experience forgiveness because it's a much rarer commodity and that's why it becomes central to all the interactions among the members of the church that this experience of radical forgiveness is to be communicated is to be offered to people so that when you go to the church and tell it to the church then in effect the church has to surround that person and say we want you to be restored to fellowship we want you to be reconciled to your brother we want you to know that this forgiveness is available to you now that's heavy if you can picture right now you standing in the middle of the church and the rest of the congregation forming a circle around you for the purposes of assuring you of love and forgiveness through Christ that would be hard to deny wouldn't it

[17:39] I mean it would make you want to either give in or to run for the door and because it would be very challenging for any of us to do that and yet you see the whole characteristic of chapter 8 chapter 18 of Matthew is except you become as a little child one of the difficulties that we have one of the very primary difficulties that we have as adults is receiving forgiveness is being reconciled reconciled resentment and anger and hate become so deeply rooted in our lives that it's very hard to tear up it goes against our pride against our arrogance against our self-sufficiency to accept the reality of forgiveness and yet if you haven't experienced that then this passage suggests that there can be no meaning to your membership in the church because that's all the church has to offer is this radical experience of forgiveness between you and those around you that's the only thing your whole inheritance as a

Christian is tied to that practical experience and so the solemnness of the ending of this passage is that if the person can't receive that then the church in fact has nothing to give him and that person from that point on is to be counted as a tax collector and as a Gentile as somebody who is outside the community now that accusation is a hard one but so is the whole passage you see of Matthew 18 the disciples were struggling as the chapter opens to see which one of them was the greatest and that's what happens when any group of people come together that natural human struggle

begins to take place which is the greatest and Christ warns them don't carry on with that if you want to be concerned about something be concerned about whether you even belong or not and then as the passage continues and talks about the various scandals by which we can hurt ourselves in our spiritual development or hurt one of the little ones a child or an immature

Christian we have to be very careful about that but then we have to be very careful about our relationship to our brother and there has to be this experience but you see probably the most radical implication of this teaching is that there may be somebody in this congregation to whom nobody can minister but you nobody can touch except you because you are the one perhaps who has been sinned against and if you don't do it if you don't take upon yourself that ministry then what can happen is that you can be destroyed by the burden of resentment that you carry in your heart and if you do do that ministry there's the possibility that you will gain a brother establish a whole new relationship now you see it's interesting that this comes in the gospel of Matthew and it's interesting that it wouldn't primarily be it wasn't

Christ teaching the church it was Christ teaching the disciples so that the disciples could teach the church and this kind of problem would not come up particularly among the closed band of the disciples but it certainly must have been a prevalent problem in the church as it still is the church of the first century and so this teaching of Christ to his disciples is brought and applied by Matthew to the life of the church and what it means is that our membership in the church is to be a radical experience of a community which doesn't perpetuate the necessity for revenge but does perpetuate the reality of forgiveness let's pray our God we know and you know that there can come surging into our hearts when we are offended a deep and persistent desire for immediate and drastic revenge granted by your grace we may experience the truth of this text and that you will give us when our brother offends us a strong desire not to be crippled by resentment in ourselves but to be able to be reconciled to our brother in order that our relationship may be established in a new way and that we may be heirs together of the grace of life in Jesus name

Amen