

Sermon – Introduction. During this series we have been looking at the teaching in Matthew and we have been hearing about some of the values and principles of the Kingdom and living as a disciple of Jesus. Today we perhaps have come to an uncomfortable subject – Church Discipline – not that, I am sure, anyone in this room this morning thinks Church discipline is a bad idea! Afterall we are disciples and that word speaks of self-discipline. But perhaps that it is where the difficulties begin, being responsible for self discipline, we may become uncomfortable if another disciple picks up on our faults, or we feel that we are not perfect ourselves so why should we point out to someone else the things they are doing wrong when we know they could easily turn the tables on us. This passage suggests a confrontational process for dealing with conflict within the church and a harsh penalty for those who refuse to listen.

When I first read this passage – I was reminded of the many policies and procedures we have at work. Most of you who work will know these wonderful pieces of paper exist in a file which everyone is supposed to know, do and follow. The

list of such policies keeps growing – we have over 30 Core policies (those applying to everyone) covering things like health and safety, safeguarding, complaints, and equality and many more local policies applying to individual projects or buildings. We have a disciplinary policy, which alone is 6 pages long and yet Jesus, in a few sentences, gives us the policy and procedure for church discipline. It reads a little like one of those flow charts which guides you through a process, and depending on the outcome at each stage – takes you to the next step.

So we have a basic three stage procedure – first speak to the individual concerned. If that doesn't get the right response we take one or two others and have another chat, and if that doesn't work we take the matter to the whole church – ask for the subject to be popped on to the next church agenda!

All very simple, straightforward and all very difficult to do!

First of all we need to start with the ‘sin’ – this is not a charter for us each to minutely examine one another’s behaviours, lifestyles, choices, habits. So that we can go and point these out. There has

to be room for everyone of us to improve in our Christian walk – some like me, more than others, because not one of us has yet reached perfection. Even Paul confessed *For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.*¹⁹ *For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.* (*Romans 7*). We need to recognise people are growing and developing, the teaching on church discipline is surrounded by teaching on the value of individuals and on forgiveness and I believe this is deliberate, we are to bear in mind the person is a much loved follower of Jesus. We should not be quick to judge someone's actions either for Jesus said...

Don't judge, so that you won't be judged. For with whatever judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but don't consider the beam that is in your own eye?" (7:1-3).

Some translations of this passage make this personal “if your brother sins against you” – some offence that has been directed at you personally and indicates this process is about resolving disputes that have arisen between individuals within the church. This is not an opportunity to hold a church trial because Mrs B said something nasty

to Mrs A and there are hurt feelings so that everyone can sit in judgement on Mrs A. The aim of the process is reconciliation, restoration and healing.

Perhaps there have been times when someone has hurt you by their words or actions which seem out of place with the Christian way – which appear to go against Kingdom principles. Now in such circumstances it might be easier to tell everyone else in the church just how this persons behaviour has upset and hurt you, without telling the individual concerned. But Jesus is clear he says ‘go tell them’. And that is difficult, because it is confrontational and if you are hurt already, it kind of exposes you to more of the same. But Jesus says, do this, give a chance for your brother or sister to say sorry – maybe they didn’t intend the words in the manner they were heard, maybe they had been having a bad day and simply took it out on you – there could be many reasons, maybe excuses for their behaviour – but give them a chance to explain, a chance to know they have hurt you, so that they can apologise, repent and be forgiven. And if they do apologise and are sorry for their actions or words that caused the problem, then you have won them over and it is the end of the matter. To be friends again all sorted. There is no need to raise the matter again with them or with anyone else.

Of course that is the outcome we would all want – but we need to take care in our approach because the outcome we want is unlikely to be achieved if we go on the attack, being highly critical, telling people they are wrong, wicked and likely to burn in hell is not always a very helpful approach – much better to begin with “I am not sure if you are aware that I was really hurt by when you said Or did.....

Proverbs 25:15

*¹⁵ Through patience a ruler can be persuaded,
and a gentle tongue can break a bone.*

In having difficult conversations with fellow believers it is always worth remembering that this is someone whom Jesus loves very much, is very precious and the purpose of this process is to win them back as a friend and restore them to walking the right path, that always is the goal in every stage because Jesus wants a strong united fellowship – not one that harbours grudges, has ongoing, everlasting disputes, the kingdom principle is about loving the person.

But there are stubborn people around, and maybe the quiet word, the gentle rebuke has not worked – the person has not seen the light, refuses to acknowledge their sin, or repent of it.

Then the next step is to take along another person, or maybe two others. These are witnesses to see that you have done all you can to persuade your brother or sister in the Lord to see their fault – if you are wise, and I trust that you are – you will turn to the minister at this stage and seek his counsel, he may be willing to come with you or suggest a suitable person or persons to do so. The person is not likely to take kindly to you turning up with two of your best mates – who they will believe are taking your side and ganging up against them. If they are stubborn in nature this will just cause them to dig their heals in and you will not achieve the object – which is healing and reconciliation. Choose wisely those who will witness the conversation and also be open to hearing that there may be fault on your side also.

If this small group are unable to resolve the issue and reconciliation does not take place, then the final stage is to take the matter to the church meeting and that by necessity, in our church, needs to be done through the minister. This is a grave step and hopefully the person will listen to the church

If the person doesn't listen to the church then they are to be treated as a tax collector or a pagan. It is interesting isn't it that Jesus used this example – Matthew was of course a tax collector before Jesus called him and he became a disciple, so

Matthew knew that even tax collectors can be redeemed and accepted, Jesus associated with them, he went and ate with Zacchaeus and this simple act caused Zacchaeus to repent and give back the money he had stolen, the money he had collected over and above the taxes he should have done. However, Jesus often uses these terms as a code for unbelievers. Paul in 1 Corinthians 5

1¹ But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister^[c] but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.

Taking away someone's membership of the church has to be seen as a serious step, and may not be appropriate for some instances, but if the behaviour of the individual is such as Paul describes here – then in effect the step is making official the fact that the person has already placed themselves outside the fellowship. They are not living as a believer, they are disobedient to Jesus' teaching and as a result are unable to be in fellowship with other believers. But there is always the hope in the process of church discipline that the individual will repent and return to a state of grace.

J.C. Ryle says “The passage is a beautiful instance of the mingled wisdom and tender

consideration of our Lord's teaching. What a knowledge it shows of human nature."

He goes on to say how much damage to the church would be avoided if we observed the rule of "just between the two of you" would splits, differences and divisions have been avoided if the disputes had been settled early, quietly between the two?

Taking the matter to the whole church is the last resort, the final step, giving the person a chance to respond, to repent and receive forgiveness and be reconciled – again if they take this opportunity to receive forgiveness it is the end of the matter. We cannot forgive **and** keep reminding someone of their failing – it may be difficult to forget but there are no grounds for the matter to be raised again.

However, failure to convince an individual that they have sinned does not entitle the church to inflict any penalty on the person other than spiritual – there are some religions that inflict beatings, amputations and even executions as punishment, Jesus gives the church a serious authority "what is bound on earth, is bound in heaven" that in terms of church discipline the decisions of the church will be supported by heaven. Whilst it cannot be taken lightly by either side, the church needs to prayerfully carry out, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, for those permitted and forbidden activities, also have to do with membership of the body of Christ.

It is a serious and painful step that may cause great offence but one that is given to the Church by Jesus, clearly expecting that they will use it and assuring them of heaven's concurrence.

And at every stage of church discipline, at the heart lies the hope that the individual will repent, and be reconciled to the fellowship and to the Lord.

Some cults use this method of discipline to control and manipulate their members – the threat of being put out of fellowship, being cut off, is so strong that people comply with the leaders demands. This process was never intended to be abused in such a way. The motives for carrying out church discipline cannot be to gain power over another and great wisdom is called for throughout the process, a great deal of prayer and careful thought as to what is said and done, in order that the individual can be restored to the fellowship.

And within this difficult process is this great promise

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.’

Where a group of Christians gather, however small a group, Jesus promises to be there in the midst.

Throughout the process, by being obedient to Jesus, by agreeing in His name and being mindful that he is with us each step of the way, helps to bring about a resolution, restore harmony and unity in Him.

It must be noted that Church discipline is not only about resolving disputes between individuals, it is about dealing with sin and those sins which Paul lists are the kind that damage the witness of the church. The process is the same – the person should be given every opportunity to repent and receive forgiveness from the Lord.

So through the three step process we hope to achieve reconciliation between individuals, forgiveness for sin, restoration of harmony and unity.

But what if this is not the outcome? What, having gone through each stage sensitively and compassionately we come to a dead end because the individual will not listen to the church?

I don't believe that to treat as a tax collector or pagan is a rejection of the individual, a washing of the hands, but a recognition that the individual is loved by God, and needs salvation in the same way as a non-believer would – someone who needs the gospel message and the witness of the believing church. The person should be subject of much prayer and the continued hope that repentance, forgiveness and restoration will be

possible in the future. But we must also remember the teaching we have considered in the last few weeks, the parable of the sower – which suggested that not all that begin the journey of faith will take root but some may fall away and the parable of the tares, sown amongst the wheat and allowed to grow together for fear of uprooting the wheat until the final judgement, both these parables have something to teach us about the process of church discipline.

There is of course two sides to this coin and as well as being offended – we may be the offender. In Matthew 5:23-24 Jesus says

²¹ ‘You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “You shall not murder,^[a] and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister^{[b][c]} will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, “Raca,”^[d] is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, “You fool!” will be in danger of the fire of hell.

²³ ‘Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

Instructions on what to do if you realise you have offended someone, to take the initiative and be

reconciled before you worship. Let us hope that our brother or sister in Christ is as willing to forgive our offences, as we are to forgive theirs. Let's be willing to apologise and do so quickly so that we can build a strong and loving church. One that does not need to go beyond the first step of this process. And whichever side of the dispute we are on let us remember the words that Jesus spoke to His disciples *John 13:34 (NIVUK)*

³⁴ ‘A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

This should be our only motive in church discipline, that we love the person so much that we do not want them to go astray, that we want them to be restored, forgiven and reconciled.