

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's passage from Matthew follows directly upon the parable of the lost sheep and is an effort to explain how the followers of Jesus are to fulfill the teaching implicit in the parable. The question is not forgiveness in this case but the sin of one member of a community of Jesus followers. "If your brother sins" is a reference to the sheep that goes astray. Every effort is to be made to bring the erring brother back into the fold of believers. If he listens to his fellow believers and repents, he is to be restored to membership in the flock. This flows naturally from an Old Testament saying frequently quoted by early Christians: "you shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbor lest you bear sin because of him." The terms *bind* and *loose* may mean to banish from the community and recall to it.

In a world that could certainly benefit from reconciliation, this is a key passage to study. It is "bedrock" for the basic principles of true reconciliation. This is because it is both "severely practical and ruthlessly idealistic." We sometimes think that papering over a disagreement or a conflict is reconciliation, but it is not. If you don't confront a real evil, nothing is gained. Forgiveness doesn't mean saying it didn't happen or it didn't matter. That's just clearing up a misunderstanding. Forgiveness is when something "did happen, and it *did* matter, and you're going to deal with it and end up loving and accepting one another again anyway."

So, the sequence here is crucial to understanding the reality of true reconciliation. You first go to the person and confront that person. If this doesn't work, you should return with one or two others to provide a reality check. If you are in the right and the person refuses to see it, they become witnesses. Finally, you inform the larger gathering. It is misleading to use the term "church" here because at this early juncture, the followers of Jesus were still meeting with other Jews in synagogues. It is probably more accurate to use the word "assembly." If the person accused continues to deny his involvement or the truth of the charge, that person must be viewed as an outcast. That is a harsh word, but if there is real evil involved, what alternative is there for a group which wishes to stand for something? Reconciliation can only be achieved after a problem has been faced head-on and actually resolved.

In Matthew 16, verse 19, when Jesus says to Peter, "*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,*" we find a related concept. But it is likely that the keys alluded to "refer to a form of communal discipline" in the early church. For example, the community rules of the Dead Sea sect provided for a trial period in which candidates for membership were examined. Each member had an assigned rank in

the community.” Violations of those rules “could lead to exclusion from the communal meal or even permanent expulsion.”

So, just a brief footnote on the Dead Sea sect. The “Qumran Community was a Jewish community which lived in the Second Temple period (from the beginning of the second century B.C.E. until its destruction by the Romans around 70 C.E. This group adopted a strict and separatist way of life. It is so called because the main source of knowledge about it derives from the discovery of a settlement at Khirbat *Qumran*, near the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, where it is believed to have lived, and where remnants, apparently of its library, were found in neighboring caves.” Thus, its beliefs have an immediate bearing upon our understanding of the practices of groups of Jews who deviated from the norm for orthodox Jews.

Unfortunately, in Christian history, this passage has often been used as the basis for policies and practices associated with church discipline. This is not really in keeping with the thrust of the passage or with Matthew’s temperament as it is depicted throughout the gospel. When the passage is used “more as a way of getting rid of the sinner than as a way of seeking the lost,” it is being mis-used.

Recall that earlier I said that this passage follows directly upon the parable of the lost sheep. That parable represented Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ complaint that he welcomed sinners and ate with them. In that sense, “the lost sheep seems to stand for the lost sinner who is *outside* the community until found.” The actual wording and context of the parable, however, “make it apply rather to *members* of the community who have ‘gone astray.’” The parable is clearly a “charge to seek the one who has gone astray.”

To understand clearly the kind of sins Matthew had in mind in penning this passage, it can be helpful to know a bit more about first century culture in the middle east. “The Semitic culture in the time of Jesus held honor in the highest esteem. Sin meant a loss of honor. For, sin had more social than psychological dimensions....one took offense if reputation was hurt, not just feelings. Jesus’ world was socially combative. Adult men would publicly debate not only to score position points but to build up one’s own reputation at the cost of another’s. People used gossip, rumor, and slander in the same way. This conflicting spirit spilled over into family honor..When it proclaimed the reconciliation of people with God, Christian community fought against this social practice.” Consequently, caution is warranted in thinking about the conduct of people involved with the founding of the early church. “Matthew has no romantic illusions about the church. He knows that the church is not all sweet thoughts, endlessly patient saints and cloudless skies. In (his) church, people, no matter how committed, are still people, and stormy weather is always a possible forecast.”

“In an honor-shame society, sin is a breach of interpersonal relations. In the Gospels the closest analogy to the forgiveness of sins is the forgiveness of debts, an analogy drawn from pervasive peasant experience. Debt threatened loss of land, livelihood, family. It made persons poor, that is, unable to maintain their

social position. Forgiveness would thus have had the character of restoration, a return to both self-sufficiency and one's place in the community." All of which points to the fact that "the sin and the sought-for reconciliation is *within the community* rather than with God. It is about *our life together as a community*, rather than our lives in relationship to God." As I pointed out earlier, this is a very practical passage that speaks to everyday human experience.

To understand the rather harsh recommendation that those who do not admit to their failings be removed from the community, it can be instructive to reflect on what sin is and what its connection is with evil itself. "It is not their sins per se that characterize evil people, rather it is the subtlety and persistence and consistency of their sins. This is because the central defect of the evil is not the sin but the refusal to acknowledge it. Evil, then, is most often committed in order to scapegoat, and the people (we) label as evil are chronic scapegoaters...In other words, the evil attack others instead of facing their own failures. Spiritual growth requires the acknowledgment of one's need to grow. If we cannot make that acknowledgment, we have no option except to attempt to eradicate the evidence of our imperfection...committing sins is not the same thing as being evil. We all commit sins. However, the sinners who won't listen to (those who confront them), or to the church (itself), need to be removed not because they are sinners but because they are evil --- unwilling to listen to the truth about their sins --- attacking others instead of facing their own failures."

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Sources

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