

CCL Values: Community

Matthew 18:15-22

Christ Church Liverpool

Main Point: God's new community live out the gospel with spiritual power in times of conflict by: love, discretion, integrity, clarity and endless patience.

Main Application: Like the gospel, true community is accessible only to the repentant, attractive in its intimacy and terrifying in its power.

The beginning of a new year, for many of us, is a time for reflection on our goals, our dreams and the things we think are important.

Well at Christ Church we are no exception to that so, for the first six weeks of 2011, our morning sermon series is focusing on our church's values.

As a church our vision, the reason we are here in Liverpool city centre, is to ***"bring grace to all people, and influence every area of the city's life for good."***

That is what we are about as a church. That is what we want to be. That's our vision. Our values, the things we are focusing on over these weeks, are the way we want to achieve that vision. Our values are the things that are precious to us, they are the way we will bring grace to all people and influence the city's life for good.

If you're freshly back from your Christmas break you can check out Maurice's sermons on the first two of our values; grace and the Bible on the web site.

This morning we're looking at the third of our church values, the third thing that we think is vital in achieving our goal of bringing grace to all people and influencing every area of the city's life for good: community.

What do we mean by that? Well here at Christ Church community means living out the gospel as God's family.

Of course Christ Church isn't the only place in the city of Liverpool that is trying to bring about change in the city through community. There are all sorts of local initiatives by local and national government and voluntary groups that seek to build communities that will make the city a better place to live. Everybody from the Girl Guides to Neighbourhood Watch to the local youth club to street parties and the Big Lunch recognizes that community absolutely vital to making people's lives better and helping them live together in a sustainable way.

But none of things, as good as they are in themselves, will ever be able to create the kind of community that can transform individuals and transform a city. Why not? Well it's simple. They won't work because only a Christian church can do that.

Now that could sound like a supremely arrogant statement. But I'm not saying that those other organizations don't work because the people leading them are rubbish. And I'm not saying that a local church is the ultimate community because we're somehow amazing or brilliant people.

No the reason that only a Christian church can be the kind of community that transforms individuals and society is that God has made it that way. Anything that is good about the church is God's grace not our works.

And in the passage we're studying this morning we see that only a local church has the nature, the goal, the power and the message that our city, and every other city in the world, desperately needs.

As he teaches his disciples, Jesus uses the situation of conflict, of one person wronging another, to show us the elements of a the only community that can change the world.

We'll see four things about the local church in this passage:

- The nature of our community.
- The goal of our community.
- The power of our community.
- The message of our community.

1 The nature of our community - brothers

There are so many ways in which people can wrong you. Sometimes people say things about you that aren't true. Sometime people say things about you that are true, but are deliberately designed to make you look bad or make them look good. Sometimes people make your friends choose between you as if there is a competition going on. Sometimes people promise you they will do something to help you and then fail to deliver on those promises.

Slander, theft, anger, spitefulness, adultery, rudeness and rejection. Each of us has a massive armoury of tools we can use to sin against other people.

When somebody does any of those things to you, when somebody sins against you how do you feel about

them? Well I guess we feel all sorts of things depending on the nature of our relationship. We might feel they have become a betrayer or an enemy. Very often we feel they have become a stranger – we thought we knew this person but their sin against us throws all that into confusion.

Well, whatever your feelings when somebody in the local church does you harm, of any sort, the first thing that Jesus reminds us of in this passage is that you deal with that person as a brother.

Talking about other Christians using the language of brothers and sisters isn't something we do all the time in our church. But we are familiar enough with those terms to be in danger of forgetting just what a big deal it is for somebody to be your brother.

Your brother or sister is somebody that, however you feel about them, you have a profound relationship to. They are a person that, whether you like it or not, you have responsibilities towards.

That's clear right from the very beginning of the Bible. The first human beings born, Cain and Abel, were brothers. Tragically, Cain, in a fit of rage, killed Abel. God came looking for Cain and asked him where Abel was, and Cain gave a reply which has become quite a common phrase in the English language: "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

To which God replied: "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries to me from the ground."

"Yes", says God, "you are your brother's keeper, Cain." You have a responsibility to your brother.

It's quite easy to think of the church community as a "thing" that I join in order to make a contribution to God's work in the world and to receive some spiritual benefits.

But that is not at all the Bible's way of thinking about the church. That is not what Jesus thinks the nature of our community is. According to Jesus when you join a church you join a family. The people in that family are your brothers and sisters – people you are deeply obliged to, and who, in turn, are deeply related to you, whether you feel like it or not.

Since I've returned from the Christmas break I've had lots of different conversations with people, as I'm sure you have too, about what they did over the holiday period.

I've talked to three different people in the last few weeks who have all been visiting family members around the country over Christmas and who have told me how wonderful it was to be able to go to church

during that time with their brothers, their genetic brothers. Now I don't want to knock that; of course it's great to go with the people we have been brought up with.

But I do want to say that in a family orientated city like Liverpool there is a real danger that we start thinking my family is my family and my church is like a second family. That's not how Jesus saw it. His family were those who did God's will, those who trusted him, Christians. Some of his genetic family were included in that group. But they weren't specially privileged.

The nature of our community is that we are brothers and sisters. So when somebody in the church sins against you, you aren't free just to ignore them. You can't just pretend they don't exist. Because that person is your brother. That is the nature of our community.

And because the nature of our community is that we are brothers and sisters the goal of our community is restoration.

2 The goal of our community – restoration

When somebody wrongs us there are a number of different ways of reacting that are common. They depend a bit on the circumstances and a bit on our personality, but almost all the time we do one of three things:

Sometimes, especially if we know it's not really all that serious, we just ignore the sin. We act as if everything is OK and try and carry on as normal, pretending it never happened.

On other occasions we find it impossible to just forget about the sin that's been done against us but we don't want to make a big fuss so we just bottle it up inside, try and ignore the person who has wronged us and hang out with some other people instead.

Alternatively we go and tell some other people about how terribly we've been treated and complain about the sin that has been committed against us.

None of those things are what Jesus Christ says a Christian in a local church who has been hurt or wronged by a fellow Christian ought to do.

What we ought to do is go and talk to the person about the sin they have committed. Notice Jesus says "go". We don't wait for them to come to us. We don't send them a letter (or a text, e-mail or phone call). We go and talk face to face. No one else. Just you and them. With the aim of trying to get them to see that they have sinned against us, so that they might be repentant.

The Christian response is not to sweep things under the carpet or to try and seek revenge. It is to seek forgiveness. As the biblical scholar Tom Wright puts it “forgiveness is when it *did* happen, and it *did* matter, and you’re going to deal with it and end up loving and accepting one another again anyway.”

Do you see the massive difference between the strategy Jesus commends and all the different strategies we commonly use? The difference is that our ways of dealing with being sinned against are all about **us**. Jesus’ way of dealing with being sinned against is all about the other person.

Ours are strategies centred on me coping with being hurt or me being able to make myself look good and by brother look bad in front of other people.

Jesus’ strategy is centred on me loving my brother or sister so much that I will take the risk they will ignore me, dismiss me or hurt me again in order that we be reconciled to each other.

Just think about the implications if this works. Somebody sins against you. They damage or hurt you in some way. You go and talk to the, and show them what they did wrong. Your brother comes to understand that they behaved badly, asks your forgiveness, receives it and you are reconciled. Who else know about this? Nobody knows. No one knows that you were right and they were wrong. There is no need for them to be embarrassed or ashamed in front of other people. There is no place where you can parade your rightness.

This is not about establishing how right you are or getting revenge because of how wrong they are. Jesus’ strategy is that if you have been wronged you ought to be totally centred, not on yourself, but on the person who has sinned against you. Your aim and goal is for them to be reconciled to you.

PAUSE

Even if the person who has sinned against you won’t listen to you the next step is to be just the same. Go back to them, this time with one or two other people – the absolute minimum number – and try again. These people don’t have to be church leaders; though I think Jesus is hinting that they ought to be trustworthy people who can be relied on not just to agree with you but to value truthfulness and impartiality.

On this second visit too what you are trying to do is bring about reconciliation. If you go and see someone who has hurt you and take a brother or sister with you it’s not about trying to punish the wrongdoer. It’s about showing that you take their sin seriously. That

you long for them to repent so that you can be reconciled.

If the brother or sister won’t take heed of two or three people the next step still has the same goal. Bring the matter to all the church and present what has happened once more. Why? Not to embarrass them or shame them or punish them but to make it clear that everybody in the church wants every other person to be in right relationship

The goal of our community, when people have hurt you, wronged you and sinned against you is not to show that you were right. It’s not to get them appropriately punished. It’s to restore your relationship.

Perhaps so far this all sounds pretty great to you. Sure it might be difficult to be part of a community where I value being reconciled to people who have hurt me above looking good in front of other people. But it seems like quite an attractive way to live.

Well it is a really wonderful way to live. But this community isn’t just attractive for its intimacy; it’s also shocking in its power.

3 The power of our community – exclusion from God

When somebody in the church family has hurt somebody else and refuses to recognise they were in the wrong. If they reject that persons attempts to reconciliation, if they reject a small group of trustworthy people, if they reject the entreaties to repentance, to saying sorry and seeking forgiveness, of all the church members there is a final sanction.

Jesus, the most loving man who ever lived, says that somebody in the church who has been confronted with a particular and specific sin and who will not repent of that sin is to be treated like “a pagan or a tax collector.”

What does that mean? Well to answer that question you have to think about how a follower of Jesus ought to treat a pagan (that is someone who worships a different god, or no god at all) or a tax collector (that is someone who says that worship your god but behaves totally differently to how they should). How should we treat such a person?

Obviously the answer isn’t “we should be horrible to them.” Neither Jesus or any of his followers went round spitting on, trampling or abusing pagans and tax collectors. Followers of Jesus have always known we ought to treat all people with kindness and grace.

But neither can we treat such a person as a member of the family. While they continue worshipping another

god or continue pretending to worship the same god the pagan and the tax collector cannot be a brother or a sister.

Treating someone like a pagan or a tax collector means treating them like they aren't part of your family any more. There will still be grace. There will still be a desire that the person repents of their sin and returns to right relationship with God and with the brothers and sisters. There will still be hope for change. But there can't be family intimacy.

The trouble is that for many Christians in many churches exclusion from family intimacy in the local church wouldn't make any difference. I quite often hear of pastors who, because of some sin they will not repent of have lost their jobs. The comment many people make about that is how terrible it is they have lost their livelihood. Which it is.

But it ought to be just a terrible an experience to be removed from membership of your local church if you are a student, a teacher, a homemaker or a doctor as to be removed from membership of your local church if you are a pastor.

The thing that should hurt someone about being excluded from the family of the local church is the massive trauma to your relationships that's going to involve.

Some of you have only been here a few weeks or months, and obviously all meaningful relationships take a while to form. But let me speak, for a minute, to those of you who have been here, perhaps, a couple of years of more. If you were excluded from family intimacy at Christ Church because of some sin you would not repent of would that absolutely terrible for you? I hope the answer is "yes." If it's not can I urge you this morning to seek to make your relationships with people here so deep and so strong that them being broken would be unimaginably painful. Because that's how our community should be.

You know, though, even that isn't the thing that should most strike us about the power of the local church family. It's not just that if we refuse to listen to our brothers and sisters we may find ourselves deprived of relationships that ought to be incredibly precious to us.

More than that it's that being excluded from the church is the same as being excluded from God.

That's what v18 is about (read). What happens on earth, Jesus says, happens in heaven. The decisions made by local churches to exclude the person who will not repent of their sin against a brother reflect a

heavenly reality that such a person is not a brother; is not one of God's people.

Now that's not to say that churches always get it right and that no church has ever treated people unjustly. Of course they have. And Jesus isn't saying that the decisions of a bunch of church members at Christ Church to exclude someone from our family is binding on God, as if we can twist God's arm.

But Jesus is saying that the decisions of a local church, of our community, have a spiritual reality about them. He is saying that if the members of a church tell you that you are behaving in a way that means they can no longer treat you as a brother or sister it's not OK just to pitch up at the church down the road as if nothing has happened.

Jesus is saying that being part of this community really matters. That when you wrong someone in the local church it is of eternal importance that you repent of that sin.

That's really what the next two verses are about. They are verses that Christians often find very confusing but they're much simpler to understand if we remember that this passage is all about what to do when somebody in the church wrongs you.

These verses are not promising that two Christians who agree to ask for a Ferrari stand more chance of getting one than if they ask on their own. They aren't even promising that two Christians who ask for a friend to start believing in Jesus stand more chance of God answering their prayer than if they ask on their own. After all if that was the case it would have been pretty stupid of Jesus, as he did, to instruct his disciples to pray on their own!

So what are these verses about?

Well when Jesus talks about two of you agreeing he's not meaning just any two people agreeing about anything. He means the two people who have been disagreeing since the beginning of this section. If those people, Jesus says, can come to agreement. If the person in the wrong repents and the person hurt accepts their request for forgiveness there will be great spiritual power. The Father in heaven will affirm their agreement and bless them.

And when Jesus talks about being with two or three people coming together in his name he doesn't just mean that he's with any group of Christians at a small prayer meeting. We've already seen the phrase "two or three" in this passage haven't we? Jesus is saying that, when two or three Christians come together to challenge a brother who is sinning, Jesus' power is there to bring people to reconciliation.

Jesus is saying that being part of this community really matters. That it is of eternal importance that we deal with our sins against one another.

To those of us brought up in the west, where the pretend-god of tolerance rules, the idea that the church community ought to have power to exclude people seems quite, well, harsh. And the idea that the pronouncements of other Christians might actually have an impact on your spiritual standing before God really sets the alarm bells ringing.

But the reality is that all communities have methods of excluding people. The remarkable thing about the church community presented here is how difficult it is to exclude someone. No follower of Jesus can be rejected as a brother because they are the wrong age, the wrong gender, the wrong size, the wrong colour or the wrong class. Unlike the National Trust the church can't refuse to admit you just because you can't pay. Unlike the local golf club the church can't ask you to leave because you're not properly dressed. Unlike the LFC supporters association the church can't discipline you for wearing an Everton shirt.

There are only two really reasons you can be excluded from the church. One is unrepentant sin against God – not believing the things he says about himself. The other is unrepentant sin against others – not treating our fellow men as God says we must treat them. The key word in those reasons, is unrepentant. Because the final, and perhaps most important thing about the community of the church is it's message – a message of unlimited forgiveness.

4 The message of our community – unlimited forgiveness

The Jewish religious teachers of Jesus' day taught, apparently, that you should forgive somebody who sinned against you and then apologised three times. After that you could simply reject them. You could choose to have nothing more to do with such a person and you would be perfectly within your rights.

Peter gets that Jesus is saying that dealing with someone who has wronged you and is not willing to acknowledge that wrong there is a process. A process designed for the sinners good, to help them see the seriousness with which the church community treats sin.

But he wants to know what happens if the person is sorry. What do I do with the person who keeps on wronging me but who, when I go to talk about it with them apologises and seeks my forgiveness. Obviously, Peter says, I'm going to be generous. What about 7 times? If Peter is meaning that literally he's going over double what the Rabbi's required. More probably he's

using the number 7 symbolically here to mean lots of times. As far as Jesus is concerned Peter is not even close. His reply in v22 is notoriously difficult to translate – it might mean seventy seven times or seventy times seven times! But Jesus' point isn't that on the 71st or 491st time you can stop forgiving but just that the Christian believer is obliged to keep on forgiving – again and again and again, forever.

It's quite a contrast isn't it? When somebody in our community hurts someone else if they are not repentant then, eventually, with tears and sadness, we are told by Jesus to exclude them from the family.

When somebody in our community hurts someone else, if they are repentant then, no matter how many times they repeat their sin, no matter how badly they hurt other people, we are told by Jesus that we must continue to embrace them as a brother.

Why such a huge difference? It's simple. It's because repentance is the only thing that matters. Amongst the billions of people on this planet there is only one division that matters. It's not gender, it's not race, it's not money. And it's not good people and bad people. It's repentant people and unrepentant people. God has in his family anybody who turns to Jesus Christ in repentance. God has in his family anyone who is sorry for their sin and rejection of him. If you aren't repentant it doesn't matter how good you think you are; you're not one of God's children. If you are repentant it doesn't matter how bad you think you are; you are one of God's children.

That's the only distinction God makes. So it must be the only distinction we make. Jesus offers unlimited forgiveness to the repentant sinner. So we must offer unlimited forgiveness to the repentant sinner too.

If we don't then the message Jesus has given us to take the world will be denied by the way we treat one another; and that must not happen. Just as it is vital that the church community excludes the unrepentant sinner to show that God takes sin seriously, so it is vital that the church community embraces the repentant sinner to show that God's grace and mercy in Christ is forgiveness forever for anyone.

Excluding the unrepentant and unlimited forgiveness for the sorrowful sinner are at the very heart of what it means for our church community to live of the gospel as God's family. No other community can live like that. Because only the local church exists to bring that gospel of grace to everyone. Our community nature is brothers, our goal is always restoration, our power is exclusion from God and our message is unlimited forgiveness.

Andrew Evans, January 2011