

Here's a point to ponder: Promote Peace

This article is from the "Edifying the Body" section of the Church of God Big Sandy's Web site, churchofgodbigandy.com. It was posted for the weekend of May 30-31, 2009.

By Reginald Killingley

BIG SANDY, Texas—Christians have been called to live in peace with all people, insofar as it lies within our power to do so. Certainly, though, we are expected to live at peace with one another, with our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

So it is greatly encouraging to read scriptures such as Matthew 18:20 that promise us that wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus' name there He is, in our midst. He is with us, to help us.

What an inspiring scripture.

Facts of Christian life

The reality of life, however, teaches us that wherever two or three are gathered in His name there is also—sooner or later—conflict.

Disputes and disagreements at one time or another are inescapable. We see that in our fellowships today, and we see that in the early church 20 centuries ago.

Christians had disagreements over whether they should go to the gentiles and how far gentiles were required to conform to Jewish religious practices (Acts 11:2; 15:2).

They sometimes had disagreements on a more personal level, as happened in the contention between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:39).

So the reality is that Christians will disagree. They will sometimes say and do things that are wrong. They will hurt and offend one another.

In fact—just five verses before Matthew 18:20 tells us that Jesus is present with us even when there are only two or three of us—the Lord acknowledges the likelihood that we Christians will offend or "trespass" against one another.

The Greek word translated "trespass" in Matthew 18:15 in the King James Version is *hamartano*, which is more commonly translated "sin," as in Matthew 18:20. We are all guilty of *hamartano*; we all sin and fall short (Romans 3:23).

Matthew 18 gives us steps to follow to resolve sins and offenses between and among Christians.

This article is not intended to discuss how and when to apply these steps. Rather, its intent is to provide four points to ponder *before* we embark on a conflict-resolution process.

Hit and miss

Much as a farmer or gardener needs to thoroughly prepare the soil before planting if he hopes to have a successful crop, a Christian, too, needs to consider the context in which the steps of Matthew 18 can be applied with a realistic expectation of fruitful results.

Simply scattering seed without adequate soil preparation is a hit-and-miss process. You may get lucky, but you are more likely to obtain a poor result.

Attempting to apply Matthew 18 without considering these points will likely lead to misplaced or wasted effort.

Is our anger justified?

The first point to consider: Should we even be offended or angry to start with? In other words, are we reacting from truly righteous indignation or simply from selfishness?

Often when I drive I encounter other drivers whose competence is clearly questionable. They don't exhibit courtesy or concern. They cut in and force me to slow down when I shouldn't have to. Clearly, my anger at their antics is justified.

Or is it?

Sometimes we're driven

Like most drivers, I pride myself on being better than average behind the wheel. But, if most of us are above average, who exactly is below average?

I have to acknowledge that I have sometimes driven in ways that were discourteous or even unsafe.

I'm sure that I felt justified in pulling out when I did, and other drivers should cut me some slack.

But if that is the case perhaps I, too, need to be less critical of them. Perhaps, in fact, I shouldn't be angry at them at all.

Blind spots

We see many examples in the Bible of people who were angry—and felt justified in their anger—but who were wrong. Their anger was misplaced and often led to sin.

Cain was angry at God for not accepting his offering, and transferred his anger to his brother, killing him (Genesis 4:5-8).

Jonah was angry at the Ninevites for repenting, and at God for forgiving them (Jonah 4:1-4)!

Even when our anger is justified, a blind spot often prevents us from realizing we might be just as guilty of action similar to or worse than that which prompted our anger (2 Samuel 12:5-7).

Of course, when someone sins against us it usually seems much worse (to us!) than when we sin against someone else.

That's the mote-and-beam principle (Matthew 7:3). Your sin is like a huge plank, whereas when I sin, well, it's nothing more than a little splinter.

Sadly, it's a huge blind spot we all struggle with (James 1:24).

The book of Proverbs is replete with admonitions against anger. Being slow to anger—perhaps even avoiding anger altogether in many cases—is deemed better than the ability to conquer and rule a city (Proverbs 16:32).

Even when we are right to be angry or upset at what we perceive to be an action that offends us, love demands that whatever action we take be motivated by the desire for reconciliation, not revenge.

Joseph could have publicly humiliated Mary when he found out she was pregnant, but his love for her prompted him to act with kindness, in spite of the hurt and betrayal he must undoubtedly have felt at first.

Prompt resolution

Even when our anger is justified, we should seek to address the cause promptly (Ephesians 4:26).

Jesus instructed His followers to interrupt an act of worship if necessary in order to be reconciled to one another (Matthew 5:23-24).

Anger should not be allowed to fester. It should be resolved quickly, the very same day if possible.

In the model prayer Jesus taught His disciples to pray for certain things, such as food, *daily* (Matthew 6:9-12). They were to seek God's will, and they were to forgive others *daily*, even as they themselves were forgiven by God *daily* (Lamentations 3:22-23).

In addition to eating their daily bread, Christians gather each year at the New Testament Passover to eat special bread representing the Body of Christ. In preparation for that annual ceremony, Christians are expected to examine themselves and understand what the Lord's body represents (1 Corinthians 11:23-29).

Throughout his epistle, Paul admonishes the Corinthians about the divisions that exist in their midst, schisms that are unjustified and inexcusable (1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 11:18).

The Body they have been called to be part of is one Body (1 Corinthians 12:12, 14, 27). Understanding or "discerning" the Lord's body, then, demands that, if there is a breach, we make every effort to restore the Body to wholeness. If there is hurt, we put forth healing. If there is anger, we seek reconciliation.

To sum up: We Christians are expected to *daily* forgive the sins or offenses that prompt our anger. And if, for whatever reason, we have not completely been reconciled to our brothers in that daily process of forgiveness, then we must at all costs forgive and be restored as we discern the meaning of the Body at the yearly commemoration of Christ's sacrifice: the giving up of His physical body so that we could become one spiritual Body.

Forgiveness removes the barrier of sin and hurt: It is gone for good (Psalm 103:12).

Don't stir the pot!

Sometimes brothers and sisters in Christ become offended because a "friend" told them about something someone else had said about them. In other words, the "friend" is a tattletale (Proverbs 16:28; 17:9; 26:20).

But why would a true friend do such a thing?

The answer, of course, is that a true friend wouldn't. People who tattle have an agenda. They either like the feeling of power that telling tales gives them or they seek revenge (often camouflaged as self-righteous indignation).

After all, if what Jack said about Jill was offensive, why didn't the tattler tell Jack to his face that he was wrong instead of running to tell Jill? Telling Jill only compounds the problem, creating division where none need have existed.

No, thanks

For our part, what should we do if someone comes to ask us if we've heard what so-and-so said about us?

The best answer is to tell the busybody (who may otherwise be a nice person) that we're just not interested in hearing it.

After all, most of us have probably said things we shouldn't have about others at one time or another, so we should just refuse to listen to reports concerning what others have said about us (Ecclesiastes 7:21-22).

Finally, we must remember that we live in a litigious society, particularly those of us who live in the United States. People sue others at any time and for any reason.

Beware insistence on 'justice'

Without fully realizing it, we can be influenced by this suit-happy culture and start demanding our rights and full legal redress in the face of whatever wrong we believe has been done to us, even if it means suing our fellow Christians.

Paul exhorted the Corinthians, who seem to have encountered a 1st-century version of this problem, to refrain from such an approach (1 Corinthians 6:1, 6-7).

The scribes and Pharisees, in one of many examples in the New Testament of self-righteousness, took a woman caught in adultery to Jesus and demanded that He apply the full weight of the law to her sin. Justice demanded as much.

Jesus refused to take the bait. He acknowledged her sin, but He also applied mercy—and humility—without which justice is incomplete (Micah 6:8).

Pound of flesh

The lesson is timeless. William Shakespeare understood this. In Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is a moneylender who has suffered much at the hands of those who disliked Jews.

When asked by one of his abusers, Antonio (the merchant of the title), for a loan, Shylock acquiesces, on condition that if the loan is not repaid by a set time Antonio must pay with a pound of his flesh.

Antonio is unable to pay back the money at the appointed time, so Shylock demands justice and insists on his pound of flesh, even when friends of Antonio offer to pay Shylock double the amount of the original loan.

The anger and bitterness Shylock felt for the wrongs and abuses of the past now make him deaf to pleas for mercy.

In the end, however, he is prevented from carrying out his bloody repayment plan by the defense lawyer's pointing out that the loan contract specified a pound of flesh: not an ounce more, not an ounce less, and not a single drop of blood.

This, of course, is an impossible task, so the tables are turned. For attempting to take the life of a citizen of Venice, Shylock is forced to forfeit all his property and convert to Christianity.

His insistence on justice and his rejection of mercy lead to his utter downfall.

Shylock's imperviousness to the plea of Portia, Antonio's legal defender, was his undoing.

Shakespeare, through Portia, understood that mercy must season—or temper—justice. The latter is incomplete without the former (Ephesians 4:32).

Quality of mercy

Portia's eloquent paean to mercy should echo in the heart of every Christian who seeks peace and pursues it.

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.