

The Bible is a message to a particular people at a particular time and place. The Gospel of Matthew is no different. When we divorce this particular message from its context, we miss some of its richness. The context included interdependence. We have individualism in our culture. We are self-reliant and we live in a me-first world. When someone is unhappy, for example, at church, they leave and find another church. People in the ancient world often lived communally, sharing everything. When they disagreed with one another, they could not just find another church. To become Christ-followers, many had given up the religion of their birth. This fractured family ties and their previous community. Now, they had a new one. This is what Jesus addresses in Matthew 18.

Matthew 18 is part of a larger section. In it, Jesus deals with life in the *ἐκκλησία*, which we translate as church. *ἐκκλησία* was a common noun in the first century. It is compound noun, like toothpaste or household. In some cases, the two words describe the meaning of the new one. Toothpaste is paste to use on your teeth. In others, they do not. A household is not a house that we hold, but a house and its occupants. *ἐκκλησία* is *ek* (out of) and *kaleo* (I call), but it does not mean "called out." It means "a popular meeting, especially religious" or it could be translated as assembly. Elsewhere (Acts 19), *ἐκκλησία* is translated "assembly."

We read the word church and picture something like this. But, Jesus had an entirely different image in mind. At the beginning of the chapter, he says that people who the world sees as important or significant should be humble like children. This is a powerful message for weak and powerless people, but it might feel confrontational to those who have power or a high position. Then, he addresses disciples.

Disciple means *learner*, and we all want to be Jesus' learners or followers. Jesus has great expectations of his followers. Saying 'yes' to Jesus means accepting the whole package. This includes the positive lessons about God's love and grace. It also includes the difficult lessons about humility and putting God above the self. Then, he cautions would-be disciples against doing anything to make someone else stumble. Each one of us is responsible before God for our behavior. We are all at different places in our spiritual journeys. Because of the freedom God gives us, we arrive at different conclusions. Add geographical background, upbringing, experiences, and education to the mix, and we are a bunch of unique people. In our uniqueness, we think differently from each other. Despite these differences, Jesus calls us to unity, to live in faith together.

Jesus feels so strongly about these stumbling blocks that he says, "It would be better to have a millstone around your neck and to be thrown in the sea" than to cause someone to stumble. He addresses morality in stark hyperbole. "If your foot causes you to stumble...cast it off...for it is better to be maimed than to face eternal fire." Discipleship is hard. And, that is Jesus' point. His calling is about transformation. We set aside our selfish ways and turn ourselves completely over to God.

Together, we are worth more than we are separate. But, when we come together, we bring our culture, and one of the defining characteristics of our culture distinguishes us from Matthew's audience. We are children of the Enlightenment. Reason and rationalism dominate our worldview. And, one of the highest values in our culture is individualism, highlighted in the phrase from the Declaration of Independence, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Matthew's audience valued community and interdependence. This is why Paul uses his communal worldview in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. The church is a body. Our individuality provides different parts to the body, not disparate pieces that barely fit together, but valuable parts of one whole.

For us, we are the bride of Christ. We are God's *ἐκκλησία* and God's hands and feet in the world. Yet, we come together as our sinful selves. Each one of us stands in need of God's grace and forgiveness. In addition to God's forgiveness, there are times when we need forgiveness from one another. Matthew 18:15-20 is about reconciling when we fail at living as God's *ἐκκλησία* or church. This might be one of the most common sins of the church today. Instead of following Jesus' example for reconciliation, we leave the church (either quietly or otherwise) and find another one. There are many reasons for leaving rather than reconciling: pride, ego, misunderstanding, ignorance of a problem, or doctrinal differences. Church grievances are not interpersonal; they are theological. They hurt the body of Christ.

Earlier in Matthew (5:23-24), Jesus said, "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." The idea is one of making peace, living in harmony, and remembering what it means to be God's people. It is too easy to find things to criticize. It is too easy to find people to dislike. Jesus recognizes this and wants us to model for the world what it looks like to get along with each other. The first step in this passage is the directive to go and seek out the person who sinned against you.

Jesus says, go to the person when the two of you are alone. Why? So that the person does not immediately feel defensive. It creates the possibility for real discourse. Arriving at different conclusions about some question does not constitute having someone sin against you. Just because you disagree with someone does not mean they sinned against you. We are a fellowship of believers under Jesus Christ. As Baptists, we have freedom before God to reach different conclusions and remain in communion with one another. We can disagree and still break bread together.

Jesus invokes a tone of humility. Go to the other person humbly. Recall what Jesus says at the beginning of Matthew 18, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." We go humbly and after having prayed. Use "I" statements, not "you" statements. Do it in person, and if possible, do it with food. Never try

this type of confrontation over email. Words on a page risk misunderstanding. Then, if we do not reconcile, we go with another person. If we still cannot reconcile, we bring the matter to the church. Jesus says, "If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

Does this mean cast the person out? No. Think about the way Jesus addressed Gentiles and tax collectors. Just in Matthew, Jesus continually reaches out to a lengthy cast of unsavory characters. In Matthew 8, Jesus heals a centurion's servant. In Matthew 9, he calls a tax collector to be his disciple. When we think, we are off the hook if we have tried to reconcile and been unsuccessful, we have missed Jesus' point. Immediately after this passage, Peter asks about forgiveness, and Jesus says, "We do not just forgive seven times, but seven times seventy." In other words, we forgive over and over again.

For Jesus, forgiveness and living in communion together—these are the Christian life. Even though the Gospel of Matthew is a particular message for a particular time and place, it applies to us today. We seek to be Jesus' disciples. And, as his disciples, we follow his teachings. He said, "Seek reconciliation from one another, forgive each other, and I am with you."