

A revolution in relationships—Matthew 18:1-20

Theme: If we are to live the revolution in the world, we need to learn how to relate to and support one another as disciples

The revolution is drawing people to follow Jesus, but how will they relate to one another? Is Jesus' band of disciples just another human society with its petty hierarchies and power-plays? Absolutely not, says Jesus. How we live together shows whether we have grasped the values of his revolution. So starting with a child as an example, he outlines the attitudes we should have towards one another.

Questions:

1. Taking the passage as a whole, what strikes you about Jesus' teaching?
2. Do we think the phrase 'watching over one another in love' sums up what Jesus says here? If so, what exactly does that mean?
3. How do we see people in our culture jockeying for position over status? Do we think it happens in church?
4. Why do you think Jesus' uses a child to illustrate his answer in v2?
5. What does it mean to change and become like a little child?
6. What causes us to stumble in our Christian lives?
7. How can we ensure that nothing we do makes a brother or sister stumble?
8. When we notice that someone has been missing from church or home group for a couple of weeks, whose job is it to phone them up?
9. How do we feel when someone points out that they think a course of action we're taking is sinful? How can we 'work' with such comments?
10. How can we point out someone's fault without causing them to stumble?
11. How do we balance what Jesus says in v15-20 with his teaching in 7:1-4
12. What do we think Jesus means by 'binding' and 'loosing' in v18?
13. What difference does it make to our gathering knowing that Jesus is in the midst?

Your stories:

Potted summary

This story is not about children or church discipline. Rather it is about how we relate to one another as followers of Jesus. The key to understanding Jesus' teaching is grasping that the community we're a part of has him at the centre. We treat one another as he has treated us. In particular we watch over one another in love, helping each other to stay true to the values of the revolution in our daily lives at home and work.

More over the page....

What the passage is about....

This short discourse (18:1-35)—that we'll be tackling over two weeks—concerns how the people of Jesus' revolution relate to one another. It is important at the outset that we get straight in our minds what this passage is **NOT** about:

- It's not about children. Although Jesus uses a child as an illustration and refers thereafter to 'little ones', he is not offering a theology of childhood or an early child protection policy. Rather he is talking about disciples, how we should view our status and hence treat each other.
- It is not a manual of church discipline. Though it has been used as such, it's important to see that nowhere here does Jesus talk about church structures or leaders. Rather he talks about relationships between members of the disciple body.

In v1-20 he speaks generally about how our relationships should be marked by a practical, mutual concern that could best be summed up in John Wesley's phrase 'watching over one another in love'. It means that as well as often offering encouragement, we will occasionally rebuke and admonish one another with a view to ensuring that we remain true to our calling as disciples. Then v21-35 deal more specifically with what happens when a relationship between two disciples breaks down—prompted by Peter's question (21).

This study is about our attitudes to one another within the family of faith, and the key to understanding it all is v20: Jesus is talking about a community that is clustered around him and takes its lead from him. As is often the case, Jesus' teaching here grows out of a question the disciples ask (1). It's possible that this question has been gnawing at them since 16:13-20: does what Jesus said about Peter make him the most important disciple? Jesus uses the question to outline four attitudes his followers need to have to experience a revolution in their relationships:

1) status (1-5)

v1 suggests that having been brewing for a while, the disciples' question about status arises finally from the incident over the temple tax (17:24-27). Is God's kingdom organised along the same lines as the Roman Empire with privileged 'sons' and not so privileged 'strangers'? It's an obvious question to which Jesus gives a non-obvious answer.

He places a child at the centre of the group—Matthew refers to the child as 'it'—and invites us to compare ourselves with it. This child is not a picture of innocence or being teachable. Quite simply, it is a picture of having no status,

of being at the bottom of every pecking order you could think of. 'You want to be great in the Kingdom of heaven,' says Jesus, 'be like a child'. This choosing of the humblest place (4) enables us to welcome one another as equals into the community of the revolution (5).

This obviously involves change (3) on our part, the laying aside of thoughts of our own importance, our own needs. It recalls the beatitudes, the foundational values of the revolution in 5:3-10 and stresses that these are vital for relating to one another in the revolutionary community Jesus is gathering around him.

2) stumbling (6-9)

Our status seeking can cause others to stumble which leads Jesus to talk generally about stumbling blocks (6, 7, 8, 9). He is not talking about how we treat children but how we welcome one another—v6-9 grows out of v5. The controlling thought is that we watch over one another in love through how we live as well as through how we welcome everyone seeking to be a disciple. Jesus says three things about stumbling:

- We can cause it (6)—so we need to guard how we live our lives
- The world can cause it (7)—so we need to watch over one another
- The causes that lie within us can be excised so that we can live as those who don't cause our brothers and sisters to stumble (there are echoes of this in 1 John 1:5-7; 2:7-11; 3:7-10).

And note the severity of the warnings attached to being a stumbling block (6b, the two 'woes' of v7, 8b and 9b)

3) straying (10-14)

Our failure to welcome and watch over one another can result in people wandering away from the community of disciples. Notice that this is personal and individual, it's about how I treat people in the group; each of us is called to welcome everyone into the community (see Romans 15:7). Such welcome is not the role of leaders (none is mentioned here); it is everyone's responsibility. We all act as shepherds in imitation of the good shepherd, God himself, seen perfectly in Jesus (9:36; see Ezek 34:11-16; John 10:27-30).

Notice that the sheep in the short parable (12-13) is not yet lost (as in Luke's version) but is wandering off. The image is of a brother or sister beginning to lose their way or becoming discouraged because they are facing hard times. We need to look out for them and draw them back gently into the heart of the community (see Gal 6:1-2).

The reference to angels (10b) is somewhat obscure! This is the only place in the Bible where such a reference oc-

curs. Perhaps it refers to the idea that angels represent each disciple in heaven in much the same way as the churches in Revelation 2-3 are represented before God by angels. Fortunately our salvation does not hang on us understanding this verse!

4) speaking truth (15-20)

Whereas the disciple was wandering in 10-14, here they are sinning. Note that the best manuscripts do not have 'against you' in v15 (as the TNIV has it). Although the stress here is on personal relationships not church structures, the sin of our brother or sister is not specifically against us (that issue is raised by Peter in v21). Jesus is saying that we all have the responsibility to gently correct one another (taking due note of 7:1-4). When disciples stray because of sin, we need to name it in the hope that the one straying will see that their actions violate the values of the Kingdom and they repent. If our brother or sister will not listen to us, then we should take someone else (note again, there's no mention of leaders here; this is what people in covenant relationship do for one another).

Only if someone persists in blatant sin—not simply behaviour that I don't like but activity that God calls wrong—do we tell the church. The picture is of the community gathered together for fellowship and teaching.

V18-20 puts all this in context. The community we're part of is not just a club, it's the Kingdom of God; Jesus is at the heart of it, so how we live matters. Picking up the language Jesus uses of Peter in 16:19, he applies it to us all: every disciple is equally able to discern the mind of God in Christ (1 Cor 2:15 – here the passage comes full circle and picks up the question about status: we're all equal).

'Binding' and 'loosing' are about things and issues not people (the words are neuter), so the reference here is probably to the actions of the straying brother or sister. Jesus says that we are able to discern right and wrong behaviour and have the duty to point it out. The clue to how this works is in the tense of the verbs relating to heaven (18). They are future perfects indicating that we are let in on what God has already decided—that is, through prayer and the scriptures, we discern God's mind and communicate that to each other and God, asking him what he wants us to ask him (19).

This is possible because we are the community of Christ (v20). Here Jesus looks beyond the resurrection to when he will truly be our Immanuel, God with us all the time, at the heart of all our gathering, however small (1:23, 28:20).