

Jesus, what do you mean by treat them like Gentiles and Tax Collectors?

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Matthew 18:15-20

Today we have several teachings that are part of a larger set of teachings. There is considerable discussion about whether or not Jesus actually said the first statement and that will be explained later. That is not as important as looking at the implications of these teachings, which are part of our canon of scripture.

The first one is an important statement about church discipline and one that has been badly abused through the history of the church. The second is related with the rather cryptic message of binding and loosing. So what is going on here?

The challenge once again is that we get just a small piece of the teaching and because of that we lose the context. Context is so critical. The statement about church discipline gets lifted out of the context and has been used as an excuse to excommunicate or shun people from a congregation. The question to ask is, what does this really teach us?

So let's look at the context. This passage is in the middle of a section on the church. Just before is when the disciples ask who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven and Jesus asks for a child to stand in their midst. He cautions them about putting a stumbling block before one such as this. This is followed by the example of the shepherd who goes out into the wilderness to find and retrieve the one lost sheep.

Then there is today's teaching. Which is a lesson in being community. What follows is Peter asking how many times must we forgive, 7 times? Jesus answers with the famous not 7 times, but 7 times 70. So we must cast today's passage in its rightful place smack in the middle of this series of teachings. Then we need to read it in the context along with the context of Jesus' other teachings.

So why do scholars wonder if Jesus said this. The use of the word church isn't really what you may be thinking of. Remember that at this time there is no "church" as we know it. They were all Jews and would have gone to synagogue and the temple. The church language in fact really comes from Matthew's community some 30 or more years later and it is not clear that Jesus would have used the word church and certainly would not have known the concept as we know it. A better word might be congregation. This is about individual congregations or a community of believers, not the church as an entire entity. That type of church is a long time in the future. This is why when I told the gospel I changed the word church to community.

Now that we know we are talking about a community of believers. Believers must care for each other so that none is lost is raised in the verses just ahead of today's passage with the story of the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep. By the way, most shepherds would not have left the 99 to go after the 1. Sent a dog to bring it back maybe, but they probably would not have endangered the whole flock for one lost sheep. So already we see that the community is held to a different standard. Then remember that the extreme constant forgiveness is what follows. The message is that each member is of great value and none are superior to others. The emphasis is on keeping the congregation together through an example of pointing out the issue and staying in dialogue for nobody is expendable.

Remember that Paul teaches that the church is one body and all the parts are needed. He clearly states this in his letter to the church in Corinth which is wracked by strife and that would have been going on before Matthew's gospel was written. This is a far different view than we tend to have today. Today we are quick to shun the one who sins and will not repent.

However there is a really important question to ask at this point. When I told this story at the gospel think back to how I delivered the line, "if they do not listen to the church treat them as a Gentile or tax collector." My vocal tone was very carefully considered. (I said this with a non-judgmental tone) Listen again and hear the difference. (This time I pronounce Gentile and tax collector with disdain and dislike). Which one sounds like Jesus to you?

Tell me, how did Jesus treat Gentiles, tax collectors, prostitutes? Did he cast them away as worthless sinners? Of course he didn't. He invited them in to the table. To Matthew (a tax collector) "I will come and dine at your house tonight." He made the Pharisees crazy because he did just the opposite of what they would do. He treated those outside as insiders. He treated them with respect and encouraged them to repent. He turned the social order upside down. So in that context think about what the injunction to "treat them as Gentiles and tax collectors" might mean. Remember in the previous verses he uses a child as an example of who might be first. Children were not even counted in the census at the time.

Maybe it says that we need to keep working with them. Maybe Jesus is suggesting that we need to stay in dialogue or maybe even start over again helping that person. For Jesus nobody is a throw away. Jesus and God never give up on anyone even if we want to. This is a tough and challenging teaching, but it means we need to forgive as he says in the very next few verses and call the person back into our community.

I came across a meditation this week by Pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes that gives this passage a very different, healing feel. Dealing with disputes in a healthy way is

healing. And we all have disputes especially in churches. We have a choice, we can either deal with them in a way consistent with the teachings of Jesus or we can deal with them the way the world does. Staying in community as Jesus calls us or breaking relationship and community as the world seems to teach us. It is our choice. One is much more challenging than the other. So here is the reflection and I have copies for any who may want it.

Well, don't go for "sin" or "fault:"
it's too easy, and useless, to judge.
But pay attention to "hurt."
Defy that voice of false politeness
and the repression of the truth.
If someone hurts you,
go toward them, not away,
and name the hurt.
Neither hide nor retaliate, even politely:
simply, gently tell the truth.
Claim your part of it,
even if just to receive it,
and to give them access to their part of it.
Not to nail them, not to relieve yourself,
but because you love them.

Be prepared to listen—
to their journey, and to your own.
Think of it as opening a door
to a place neither of you have gone before,
and can't without the other.
Think of it as opening the door
to that Jesus place.

Imagine how refreshing the air would be
in a community of open, caring honesty,
without that hidden bucket of hurts
fermenting under the kitchen sink.

In the dark places where our hurts lie
is the tomb from which Christ rises, alive,
the very Christ who,
wherever two or three are gathered in his love,
is among us. ¹

¹ <https://www.unfoldinglight.net/reflections/gz9p8d6mnj4pw678htb8ljk442gw>