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THE NEW SHOFAR

Sometimes people's spiritual ideas become fixed and they use them against those who don't share their beliefs - in effect, becoming fundamentalist. It's very dangerous - the finger of righteous indignation pointing at someone who is identified as bad or wrong.

Christ's ministry was about reconciliation, not punishment

I am often amazed at Jesus' commitment to unity in the church and our sometimes lack of interest in the same topic. This perhaps help understand why many readers of this text from Matthew see it in terms of bringing ways of punishing the sinner. Nothing could be further from the truth. This passage is primary focussing on reconciliation, the forgiveness of sins and the compassionate love of brothers and sisters for each other – no matter what.

This is straightforward advice from the lips of our Lord. It is among the last pieces of advice He gives the disciples as he prepares to enter Jerusalem for Holy Week in **chapter 21**. Note where Jesus begins. He seems to know too well how forgiveness and reconciliation are not often the first thought to mind when someone is wronged. When a brother sins against us the automatic thing for some is to go to friends and talk *about* the person rather than going to the source of the problem and talking *to* the person. Bitter experience shows us how this spreads the emotional load and ends up working to perpetuate the problem rather than work toward a solution and reconciliation. Jesus calls us to be *ministers of reconciliation*. —**2 Corinthians 5:18**... *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation*. That is the God-given vocation of every baptised person in Christ.

Speaking the Truth in love

It is helpful to look at the rest of chapter 18 in Matthew to help us understand the things necessary to become a better minister of reconciliation. The chapter begins with a most significant first step: Jesus teaches that *whoever humbles himself like a child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven*. Too often this pursuit of another person can be justified/rationalised by our need to be **right** and to know the other person is **wrong**.

So much of our need to be right is tied to pride. In our reading from Romans, Paul reminds us that we are to *outdo one another in showing honour*. —**Romans 12:10**. He also warns us to, *not be haughty, but to associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight*. —**Romans 12:16**. We could avoid so much pain and conflict if we could only slowdown in our rush to challenge another person in their sins and bring “righteous judgment” on their heads. One message from today is the need to learn to look at issues from many perspectives. Just because we find someone to be annoying, offensive or just weird does not mean they are, no matter how many others agree with me. From the perspective of heaven, we as believers must learn to speak the truth in love, search for the divine image in which this annoying person is created and ask ourselves this question: *why is it God saw fit to bring this person into my life?* He or she is there for me, just as I am here for them. Once we have sorted through this, we then ponder how my plan of actions fits into my baptismal world where Christ is my model.

Revealing Jesus in the way we live in love

Jesus was sent by the Father for the forgiveness of sins, sent that heaven and earth could be reconciled. He always had, as his first initiative, a genuine and lasting reconciliation between sinners and his Father. Jesus was/is *the way, the truth, and the life* and he **modelled** humility in his dealings with those who had fallen, those pushed to the fringes of the community. He went further in that he carried the consequences for *our sin* upon his own shoulders that we might be reconciled to God. Before we dare presume for ourselves some kind of prophetic

authority, before seeing ourselves as *watchtowers* warning others of the consequences of their actions and after judging them find them wanting and needing to be removed from the community, we need to be before this person as Christ himself would stand before them.

I can think of so many examples of Jesus looking into the eyes of sinners, face to face, and forgiving them while at the same time telling them to sin no more (the woman caught in the act of committing adultery). If we would be Christian ministers of reconciliation we must learn humility, even as our Lord humbled himself. —**Philippians 2:5-8**...⁵ *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*⁶ *who, though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,*⁷ *but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,*⁸ *he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*

If there is no forgiveness do not presume to admonish the other who has sinned

Chapter 18 ends appropriately with the *Parable of the Unforgiving Servant*. This is the parable of the man who was forgiven a huge debt and yet he refused to forgive a small amount that his fellow servant owed him. Unforgiveness and a quest for our form of justice do not help us in our quest to become faithful servants of God and servants of all. The kingdom of God operates on grace and mercy. Once again Paul reminds us in today's epistle that, *We are to repay no one evil for evil.* —**Romans 12:17**; and *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'* —**Romans 12:19**. Paul helps us to see that when we take revenge, or set out to sort things out, we do it not because we lack a sense of justice, it is because we have a lack of faith. We do not trust that the Lord is just, that he is the only one capable of "sorting out" our problem children. We do not trust that he will make things right in the end. We take justice out of his gracious hands and put it into our bloody ones. The only bloody hands we need to remember are those of Jesus.

In short, when our brother sins against us we are to go to them and talk face to face. We do so in humility, not pride. We go seeking reconciliation, not revenge. **Ponder this:** We need to realize that we are in trouble when we talk in terms of "us and them." In reality, the only "us" is a world full of sinners *like us* and the only "them" is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Before we presume to wear the mantle of God and bring what we consider to be a fair judgment "for the good of the whole of the community and the sake of the Kingdom" we would be wise to pause and consider things from the divine perspective once again. Our God cries out to us in the words of Ezekiel, *I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?* Is this what my actions will do? Bring heavenly healing and Gospel reconciliation?

We must not seek ways of rationalizing our actions when what in fact we are doing is hurting and punishing others. This is not being Christlike. Christ always found a way to find the image of his Father in even the worst sinners. We must stop cursing the darkness and light the candle of communication by meeting face to face with someone with whom we disagree. Do that seventy-seven times seventy seven if that is what is needed. We who are baptised are bound together as the Body of Christ and we serve a God whose will is that not even little ones should be lost (**Matthew 18:14**). In service to our God and in the name of God's Christ, we become agents of Gospel reconciliation to each other and to the world that God loves. We should settle for nothing less. According to the Apostle Paul, *one part of the body cannot say to another part of the body: I have no need of you!* (**1 Corinthians 12:12-26**). We deal with sin and sinners in ways very different to those of the world...or do we? Sometimes we can convince ourselves that we are on the side of righteousness while acting in the most unrighteous of ways.