

## When We Agree

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, September 9, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 19:16-24; Psalm 115:1-11; Matthew 18:15-20.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

Jesus was very realistic about life within the church. He was very realistic about Christians. He recognised that Christians may and will sin *Just as families have fights, none in the family of Christ have fights.* against one another. He had no illusions about sinless perfection.

Christians are not people who claim to be perfect or sinless or even better than non-Christians. The fact is that often we see more of Christian love in an atheist or a Hindu than in a Christian. Christians don't claim to be without sin. *enter the church through baptism* We ~~are~~ baptised as a way of confessing that we need to have our sins washed away by the blood of Christ. We begin our worship service with a Confession of Sin. By doing so we acknowledge that to be a Christian and to identify with the Christian church is to make a confession that we are sinners who need to be forgiven. We have done those things which we ought not to have done and we have not done those things which we ought to have done. We are Christians because we confess our need of Jesus and the forgiveness he died to obtain for us.

Sometimes our sins are known only to God and not even to ourselves. God sees areas in our lives where we need to repent and we aren't even aware that we have a problem. Through the study of the Bible and within the fellowship of others God can begin to reveal to us those things in our lives which are displeasing to him even when we aren't aware of them.

Sometimes our sins are known to ourselves as well as to God. We confess them privately to God and God forgives. No one else knows. No one else needs to know. I think all of us have sins in our lives that we're aware of that nobody else but God is aware of.

But often we sin against others. We hurt others. We say unkind, unloving things to others. We slander them. We do hurtful things. We secretly rejoice when they stumble and fall. Christians are as guilty of this as anyone. Jesus was aware of this. He knew that in the church there would be members who sin against one another. Sometimes we sin against a brother or sister and we're not even aware of the hurt we've done. Other times we hurt them intentionally.

Let's bring this closer home. There are about 150 people in this auditorium this morning. Some of you have been sinned against by others in this congregation. You're nursing your wounds. You want to be forgiving but it's hard to forgive and to forget. I've known of church members who have nursed wounds for years. The animosity between families is passed down through the generations in some churches. The place where we are most apt to sin against another is in our own homes. Sunday mornings are often hectic for families. Husband sins against wife and wife sins against husband in our attempts to get to Sunday School and to Church. Hateful words are exchanged.

I think also of the rebuilding process. Some of you, I'm sure, are feeling angry and distressed at some of the decisions that have been made. What do you do with those feelings of anger and frustration? You feel, perhaps, disenfranchised from the process. You feel ignored. You feel powerless and voiceless in the rebuilding of this church which you love and have supported and prayed for over the years.

When someone sins against you, intentionally or unintentionally hurts you, what do you do? One response is to simply pretend to ignore it. Pretend to yourself and to others that you really don't care, you don't notice.

Only that response tends to eat away at you inside and, eventually will come out in destructive ways.

Another response is to try to get back, to retaliate. If someone makes a snide remark to you, make a worse snide remark back to them. If someone snubs you and ignores you, you snub and ignore them. There are all kinds of ways to get back at fellow Christians who've sinned against you.

Still another response is to say nothing to the one who has sinned against you but to talk about that person to others. Tell others how that person has sinned against you, put you down, hurt you.

1. But Jesus tells us that, if we're sinned against, we're to go personally to the one who has sinned against us. Personally. Not by a phone call. You need to be able to look into the person's eyes. And not even by a letter. A letter may be misread and misunderstood. If we have a difference with someone, there's only one way to settle it and that's face to face.

Sometimes I've gone to a person whom I think has sinned against me only to discover in a face to face situation that I've misread or misunderstood their words and actions. The matter is settled quickly and happily. Sometimes I've sinned against someone, intentionally or unintentionally, and that person has come to me persistently seeking to be open about the conflict and I'm so glad they do.

Jesus also said that we're to go privately, at first, to the offender. There's nothing more embarrassing and damaging to confront another in public with their sins. It's not only embarrassing. It's uncharitable and it's not constructive. It does nothing to build up the church. It only tears it down. Go privately and talk personally with the one who has sinned against you.

2. Then, Jesus says, if a private and personal talk doesn't work, and matters aren't settled, and the one who has sinned against you expresses no desire for reconciliation, then we should take two or three persons with us to listen. These witnesses aren't meant to be a way of intimidating the offender or of proving the person wrong. They're there to help the process of reconciliation. Sometimes, in fact, when I have serious differences with another person I find it helpful to invite a few mutually respected friends to listen to both sides of the story, to ask questions and to suggest ways in which we may be reconciled.

3. If this fails, Jesus says, we should then take our troubles to the whole fellowship of believers. I don't think Jesus intends for you to stand up in a worship service and accuse another Christian who has sinned against you. I think that would be destructive. A lot of people there, especially visitors or non-Christians, simply wouldn't understand and it would create a really bad impression. Rather I think Jesus has something more personal and intimate in mind. Sometimes when I've had irreconcilable differences with another it has helped me to share my frustration with a small group of believers in a prayer meeting or a support group.

I think that's what Jesus had in mind when he said "if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven." I think that needs to be interpreted within the context of seeking reconciliation with a fellow Christian. When we are unsuccessful in our efforts to bring about reconciliation we can find other Christians who can pray with and for us and for the person who has offended us. I believe that Jesus never wants us to give up and so gives us this promise to pray with others for reconciliation and not to be satisfied until it happens. Jesus didn't want us to bear our troubles alone. He gave us the church to help us

bear one another's burdens. In an atmosphere of Christian prayer, Christian love, and Christian fellowship personal relationships may be straightened out.

If after all this you still aren't reconciled to the Christian brother or sister who sinned against you, Jesus says, "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." That sounds so harsh to us. Does Jesus mean that we're to treat such a person as a non-Christian and to shun them?

To answer that all we have to do is to look at how Jesus treated tax-collectors and gentiles. He didn't treat them as hopeless sinners. Jesus always treated tax-collectors and gentiles with gentleness and sympathy. He was able to see in them good qualities that others weren't able to see. Tax-collectors and Gentiles, in fact, were more responsive to the preaching of Jesus than the more religious people were. So, I believe that when Jesus tells us to treat a fellow member of the church as a tax-collector or a gentile he's telling us to treat them as he treated them. Let them be a

challenge to us to win their love. *Never give up no matter how recalcitrant the offender may be... that man or that woman may be won back... regained as a friend & member of the family of Christ*

What Jesus says in this passage is so important to us today in the life of our church. "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one." Let's do all that's possible to regain those who have sinned against us.

*C.S. Lewis: No threat Duns  
Hell is like a great city  
populated only on the outer fringe  
unpopulated in the center  
empty houses  
desert streets  
crumbling buildings  
why - people always arguing & moving away  
this is the reason why Hell is so large*

*Is there someone you need to talk to today or tomorrow  
an appointment you need to make with someone*