

No place I'd rather be.

Revd. Jon Hutchinson – 6 September 2020

The reading chosen for us today makes some background assumptions, sets out practical steps for church behaviour the attitude the church should adopt when someone is drifting from faith...however it has been misunderstood and misused. Let's see what it teaches us.

The background assumption is that those who believe are in Christ and as Jane explored last week we only find our true identity, our worth and purpose when belonging to Jesus through faith in him.

And the second assumption is that those who belong to Christ are part of the family of the church and that there is no better place to be than in the church family. I wonder if that's your experience?

Because the church is made up of people who are all a work in progress, inevitably we can cause each other grief and we have to pay attention to relationships in order to stay in fellowship and be at peace. We are the body of Christ and everyone has a part to play and a place in the church.

So the assumption is that those who believe in Christ belong to the church and that when the church is all it can be – there is no better place to be and that drifting away from the fellowship of the church is serious because of the consequence of losing the faith.

Our Gospel sets out what to do when someone in the church has sinful behaviour...but here we need to delve for a moment into the gospel origins. The gospel was copied by hand for many centuries and the earliest manuscripts can have differences between them.

If there are 10 copies of the gospel and only one has a difference it's easy to assume the other 9 are accurate copies but if you have an equal number of copies some written one way and some another it creates a dilemma. That's the case here.

V 18 in our bible says "If another member of the church sins against you, go and

But other ancient texts leave out the "against you" which changes the dynamic.

"If another member of the church sins"....it makes it much less personal.

Let's explore both options.

If a member of the church sins....go and point out the fault.

The aim of this intervention isn't to be judgmental, or authoritarian. It's to go in humility and kindness because what is at stake if the church member may be drifting from faith and slipping back into old ways. The aim of the intervention is to 'regain' the sheep that is wandering off.

And if they don't listen then go again and take a couple of people as witnesses to observe your attempt to rescue this lost soul and if they STILL don't listen bring it to the church family so that the whole community can try as best they can to persuade the drifting soul to come to their senses.

It takes very seriously the consequences of losing faith and drifting from fellowship. Remember just how many parables Jesus told of people being too late, or shut out, or thrown out, or lost. The church cannot be casual about those losing faith.

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IF – after all the interventions the person still doesn't repent and return, they are to be treated as if a Gentile and Tax-Collector and it's tempting to think that at this point the church says "You're dead to me" Sinner – Outcast. Be gone.

Completely wrong. Jesus spent a great deal of time with gentiles, sinners and tax-collectors – he reached out to them in love telling them the kingdom was for them, seeking to draw them into the family of faith.

The attitude the church adopts in this strategy is love, love, love and then love – seeking always to win back, to draw back in BECAUSE – there's no place better to be than in the church and in the faith.

If we take the other translation it makes it MUCH more personal and yet the onus is on the person sinned against to follow the steps set out.

Now – if someone sins against me 1. It's irksome that I have to take the initiative to reach out to the sinner. 2. I'm very likely to want them to confess that they have done me wrong and I'll probably be quite judgmental. If they turn me down – well then...I'm all for the next step of taking a couple of witnesses because it will show them what a fine fellow I am and how sinful the other person is and you can probably see the emphasis shifts from the mortal danger this sinful soul is in and the love required to win them back, to demonstrating that I am in the right and they are wrong!!!

In fact if they turn me and the witnesses down then bringing it to the church is another opportunity to demonstrate my holiness, their sinfulness.

I have to say – the church has taken this approach far too often.

The assumption is that drifting from the church fellowship is a dangerous and serious matter – that great love is required to win the soul back and whichever wording we opt for – whether it's the "church" intervening or the person sinned against intervening there is a humility, kindness and attitude of love required to win someone back.

What a challenge and what a task and we explore this further next week as Gilly preaches on forgiveness – I'm very happy to be the introduction this week to all she shares next week.

But rather than hold your breath all week wondering where this takes us – how to respond today?

In Christ Alone verse 1.

Lord Jesus we thank you that we live and move and have our being within your love. When church is living as you taught there is no pace we would rather be, sharing the love, joy and peace bought for us by Jesus Christ.

We come in humility to ask forgiveness for the times when we have failed to love and failed to care. Where church members have been allowed to drift away or been excluded. Have mercy on us and grant us the grace to seek forgiveness and restoration.

Lord in your mercy...

In Christ Alone verse 2.

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Lord Jesus your death brings me life. Your death saves me from the consequences of my sin. Help me to act with compassion towards those slipping from faith, falling back into old ways and at risk of being excluded. May my gratitude at your suffering be all the prompt I need to save souls from indifference. Grant courage to be willing to take the three steps particularly if I am the one sinned against.

Lord in your mercy.

In Christ Alone verse 3

Lord Jesus you overcame death and hell and nothing is impossible with you. We hold before you now those we love who have drifted from the faith, or been pushed away or turned off. May we see your hand at work in saving lost sheep, restoring into fellowship and bringing into fellowship those who need forgiveness and love.

Lord in your mercy...

In Christ Alone verse 4.

Lord Jesus grant us the power and the strength to live up to the values and standards you long for your church to show. May we truly be the body of Christ, loving and caring, welcoming and forgiving. Gentle over differences of opinion, accommodating over different expressions of faith, firm in being united together.

Lord our prayers have been for ourselves, but we are mindful of the need to pray for others. For those in authority taking difficult decisions day to day. Those tackling the pandemic, all affected by it. Those who mourn and those who are sick, calling to mind those you have paid on our hearts.

We pray for our school, for Jo as headteacher, Aileen as chair of Governors and the teaching staff as they gear up for a new school year. We pray for the children returning to school many will be nervous and unsettled. Grant them your peace.

And Lord – sustain us through this time of trial until we can meet again in complete freedom. Let these restrictions be like the chrysalis stage so that when the time comes we emerge more beautiful than ever before.

Merciful father, accept these prayers for the sake of your son, our saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Accept these prayers