

“EVERY PROFOUND MIND REQUIRES A MASK”

Matthew 18:15-20

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 7, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

*“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.
But if you are not listened to,
take one or two others along with you,
so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.
If the member refuses to listen to them,
tell it to the church;
and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church,
let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.
Truly I tell you,
whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.
Again, truly I tell you,
if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask,
it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.
For where two or three are gathered in my name,
I am there among them.”*

In our society, very little remains private, beyond the gaze, or at least potential gaze, of the public. Whether we are talking about

- sports figures whose eruptions on and off-court are subject to instant and continuous re-play
- college students whose driving, dating, and drinking encounters can be posted on internet sites, sometimes of their own initiative, sometimes not
- or preachers and politicians in places of compromise,

nearly everything we say or do can enter the public domain.

We have mixed feelings about our loss of privacy.

- In a survey of privacy in Great Britain, 84% of those surveyed said they would not disclose details about their income online, yet 89% of them willingly did.¹
- One writer points out: “Your auntie now has a harder time learning the location of your recovery room, but a cancer researcher you’ve never met...has little trouble finding your first and last names in a tumor registry...”²
- Nine years ago, the chair of Sun Microsystems said: “You have zero privacy anyway. Get over it.”³

In the current presidential race, the ever present concerns about the privacy of candidates and of their families are part of this larger context. None of us really knows how much privacy we have or lack, and none of us is fully comfortable with the way things are.

I.

I have a longstanding interest in privacy, due partially to the fact that I am Presbyterian.

- “God alone is Lord of the conscience...” we say. Not the church. Not the political party. Not the family. But God alone.

¹ L. Gordon Crovitz, “Privacy? We Got Over It,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 8/25/08/

²² Garret Keizer, “Requiem For the Private Word,” *Harper’s Magazine*, August 2008.

³ Crovitz.

- “Therefore,” we add, “we consider the rights of *private* judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable...”⁴

Into these mixed feelings, uncertain cultural situation, and Presbyterian emphasis concerning privacy, the words of Jesus we have just read can sound like an invasion of privacy.

Jesus is well into his ministry.

- He has gathered disciples, healed many, left behind a slew of parables, and is on his way to betrayal and arrest, trial and crucifixion.
- He begins to prepare his disciples to carry on after his death and resurrection.
- In fact, in one of two places where he actually uses the word “church” in Matthew,⁵ he sets up a process for resolving conflict within the church and even dealing with misconduct among its members.

At first glance, his words sound like an invasion of privacy, quaint, out of date, yet harsh:

- “Go and point out the fault”
- “Take witnesses with you”
- “Tell it to the church”

Jesus’ words call up memories of Hester Prynne being forced to wear the “the scarlet letter” in the Puritan village in which she has a secret affair with the local minister, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale⁶ in the novel we all read in high school.

However, if we look closely at what Jesus says, there is wisdom to his process, and, as we shall see, more privacy than at first appears. Follow my closely as we analyze these words Christ provides:

(a)

First, Christ sets up a fair process.

- The people alleging a crime or sin, or the parties involved in a conflict, must first seek to resolve their differences among themselves, alone, one-on-one.

*If another member of the church
sins against you [he says],
go and point out the fault
when the two of you are alone.*

- If the individuals or parties cannot resolve their differences, then, says Jesus,
*take one or two others along with you,
so that every word may be confirmed
by the evidence of two or three witnesses.*
- If grievance remains or resolution does not emerge, then and only then, the process moves to the whole congregation.

The process Jesus outlines is fair and it is private. It first involves only the principles, then only a handful of witnesses, and, as a last resort, the general public, in his case, the church.⁷

Contrary to dismissing concerns for privacy, the process Jesus sets up protects individual and human rights, as well as human dignity.

⁴ Both these references come from “The Historic Principles of Church Order,” in *The Book of Order: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Volume II, 2005-2007 edition, G-1.0301(a) and (b).

⁵ The other place is 16:18.

⁶ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

⁷ In addition, for there to be any finding of guilt, there must be witnesses. Leviticus 19:17-18; Deuteronomy 19:15; I Corinthians 5:1-4, 11-13; Galatians 6:1; II Thessalonians 3:14-15. The text reflects longstanding traditions within Judaism adopted by Christianity requiring eyewitnesses before moving to conviction and sentencing.

(b)

Second, despite what seems like a punitive passage, and what in history has been used for punitive purposes, the actual focus of the process Jesus sets up is reconciliation and restoration.

- Jesus does not specify penalties; instead, he focuses on the goal of reconciliation.⁸ “*If the member listens to you [he says], you have regained that one.*”
- In addition, when the offender is found guilty yet remains unrepentant, Jesus says, “*Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*”
 - On the surface, this sounds like Jesus counsels shunning and excommunication,⁹ yet the term “Gentile and tax collector” describes those who are to be special objects of missionary efforts and affections,¹⁰ like widows and orphans.
 - Rather than leading people to shun the guilty, Jesus words lead them to say: “You mean we are supposed to reach out to them as well! I thought we just found them guilty!”¹¹
- Furthermore, these legal instructions Jesus provides appear in a section of his teaching that overwhelmingly stresses forgiveness. Immediately prior to this passage, Jesus
 - highlights the humility of a child
 - warns against placing stumbling blocks in the way of peoples’ faith
 - points to care for straying sheep
 - and depicts rejoicing when one who is lost has been found as bringing joy to the heart of God.

Immediately following this passage, Jesus

- shows that forgiveness can never be calculated
- and questions whether one who withholds forgiveness has ever really experienced it.¹²

As harsh as these words initially sound to us – “*let one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector*” – they actually call us to focus on reconciliation and restoration.

(c)

Third, despite what seems to us like an invasion of privacy, Jesus’ words actually reveal a reticence to prescribe the shape and form of human resolutions. Jesus refuses to be specific about the nature of the offense that has been committed or penalties to be exacted.¹³

It is as if God is looking at two individuals who cannot get along, factions in a church, or perhaps factions in a nation and world, and saying: “I’m not really interested in what you have done, and I’m not on a hunt for punishment and retribution. You have the power to resolve your differences; you have the power to reconcile; now get about the hard work of reconciliation.”

(d)

And finally, when people reach accord, Christ promises his presence and blessing.

*Truly I tell you,
whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven...,
if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask,
it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.
For where two or three are gathered in my name,
I am there among them.*

⁸ *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version With the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), Matthew 18:15-20n.

⁹ See also I Corinthians 5:1-5, II Thessalonians 3:6-15, and II John 10.

¹⁰ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: 1991), 269. Harrington points out that “tax collectors and sinners” have already been introduced to Matthew’s readers as persons who are capable of coming to great faith (Matthew 8:1-11, 9:9-13, 11:19, 15:21-28).

¹¹ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 210.

¹² See Matthew 18:1-25 for these teachings and events.

¹³ *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version With the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), Matthew 18:15-20n.

Where two or three are gathered in the name of Christ, where they sit together, where they come to an agreement, the divine presence passes between them!

III.

You have done some heavy listening in this sermon. Let me draw it to a close with two quick applications.

First, in being reticent about providing details of offenses and punishments, I think Christ is giving us maximum human freedom to resolve our differences to the best of our ability. I believe this to be true in relations

- as intimate as marriage and family
- as challenging as that involving parents and teenagers
- and as social as divisions between women and men, people of different races, even people of different nations.

We have the freedom to come to agreement; and when we do in a way that provides relative satisfaction to all, we find the blessing of God upon us.

Second, it follows, then, that not everything needs to be known beyond those who are directly involved.

- Some matters are best left in the hands of those closest to the ground: neither the church, nor the state, nor the public in general need to know everything in all instances.
- The goal is legitimate and fair reconciliation; not exposure of all the details that lead to such.

IV.

“Every profound mind requires a mask,” said Nietzsche.¹⁴

Perhaps every profound act
of repentance and forgiveness,
reconciliation and resolution
needs some degree of privacy to be achieved.

Perhaps we don't need to know everything,
or tell everything.

Maybe the blessing of God
on even that which is hidden
is sufficient.

Amen.

¹⁴ Quoted in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Shame,” in *Ethics* (1949).