

Responsibility Matthew 18:15-18, 21-35

1. Today's sermon is based on a thesis: 'In the church we take and accept responsibility for each other.' The church should be a bulwark against individualism and the spirit of the age, which is thinking of one's own interest first and foremost. To the question in Genesis 4, 'Am I my brother's keeper?', we respond, 'Yes, I am.' 'Yes, you are.'
2. This responsibility is seen, for example, in the fact that as members of the congregation we contribute together (according to our abilities) to the work of the church in the village and in the world. We contribute our time, energy and money as it is given to us by God.
3. As church members we meet together regularly to discern the mind of Christ. We call that a church meeting. Church meetings are not about winning ballots but about our common responsibility for the work of God. The church meeting makes sure that there are policies for child protection, care for vulnerable adults etc. ; we do so not just because the government requires this, but because we seek the good of all people and especially the weak.
4. Matthew 18 is a chapter in which Jesus looks ahead to the period when he will be gone; it contains his teaching on the church. It contains two passages which are almost in tension with each other. On the one hand there are verse 15-18, which speak about being accountable to each other in lifestyle matters. These verses show that Jesus cares how his disciples live – and so should we.

However, we should avoid any legalism and 'holier than thou' mentality. Jesus' followers should be a force for good in this world. But they should not look away when something goes wrong, when a church member commits a serious offence. In such a case they should not gossip either but address the perpetrator directly. If needed they can take someone else with them. If needed, there can and should be discipline in the church.
5. On the other hand verses 21-35 tell us to forgive one another. None of us is perfect and therefore we all need forgiveness. So we need to forgive each other, time and again.
6. Is it me or is there a tension between these passages? Does the strictness of discipline here stand over against the clemency of forgiveness? We can solve the tension when we say: Normally we forgive one another, but sometimes we need discipline in the church.
7. In the church we take and accept responsibility for each other. So to the question in Genesis 4, 'Am I my brother's keeper?', we respond: 'Yes, I am.'