



## RESOLVING CHURCH CONFLICT, PART 1

MATTHEW 18:15-20

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Humans need to get along to survive.

We are primarily communal creatures. We need others. We have little choice. Isolation means extinction. We're a lot more than a sub-species of primates at the top of the food chain. At the same time we're more than a variance in natural selection, elevated by how we use our cerebral cortex and manual dexterity. We are made in God's image, here to love and serve God by loving and serving each other. To that end, we must learn to get along. And to get along, we will need to learn to forgive. Matthew brings us clear advice on followers of Jesus getting along with each other.

I suggest that while forgiveness may be simple and easy in some situations, to remain a familiar and regular tool in our relationship kit it will need to be learned, re-learned and practiced . . . over and over. Like walking, riding a bike or balancing in a kayak, there are basics we must master, or we are in for a fall.

But forgiveness is more than a mechanical act. It is also orientation of the heart. It is a commitment of the will. It is an infusion and transmission of God's mercy readily and constantly available, not dragged out grudgingly at the end of a conflict. At our most mature, it will be inherent in our interactions, particularly when conflict first presents itself and we are sorting out our triggers, emotions, and reactions. I'm better at forgiving than I was as in my twenties, and I'm humbled by the ways I have yet to grow. How about you?

Here in Matthew 18 Jesus is teaching Christian Conflict Resolution 101. Knowing our imperfections, Jesus knows how sorely we need both the ability to avoid and, when necessary, resolve life's many conflicts. While originally delivered to a Middle East, shame-based culture, this gospel rings particularly true in our litigious, politically charged and hyper-sensitive times. Jesus is clear. They are meant for (1) Christians, not unbelievers, (2) sins committed against you and not others, and (3) conflict resolution in the context of the church, not the community at large. Jesus' words are not a license for an attack on every person who hurts or slights us. They are not a license to start a destructive gossip or smear campaign, or to call for a church trial. Wrongs may indeed call for a church trial at some point. Here, the conditions of action are very precise: *If your brother or sister sins against you, go to them and show them their fault. But do it privately.*

Pope Francis has some very good advice for implementing this gospel. He counsels: “See everything, overlook a great deal, correct a little.” We are to act sparingly and lovingly in matters that are serious enough to be classified as “sins” and only when we are directly involved. We should not act from pride, resentment or annoyance, but only from compassionate Christian love. No dramatics. No gotchas. Directly and succinctly Jesus lays out practical best practices for resolving conflict and dealing with its aftermath. Not surprisingly, the secret ingredient is love.

Matthew cautions us earlier to not to fixate on the speck in another’s eye and ignore the log in our own. In private, thoughtful and prayerful consideration, we should seek the Spirit to guide us, to help us sort out the facts, to help us purify our motives, to point us toward solutions. Upon due discernment, if we are convinced that it is God’s will that corrective action is needed, Jesus does more than give us helpful hints, He tells us precisely what to do. But we often do the opposite of what Jesus recommends. We turn away in offense and resentment. We let it build to hatred and seek revenge, engage in gossip (which is a kind of revenge), start a rumor (which is a kind of revenge), give the cold shoulder or the silent treatment.

In C.S. Lewis’ book, *The Great Divorce*, he describes Hell as a great, huge, dark place where there is no contact between people. In *The Great Divorce*, Hell starts out small, but people quarrel with one another and move away from each other. Then there was another quarrel and the people moved farther away. And so on, and so on, until finally no one can even see anyone else. And there they live, alone in the darkness. That’s what Jesus wants us to avoid.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 18 that we should take our disagreements directly to those with whom we disagree precisely because that is the opposite of Lewis’ vision of Hell. As followers of Christ we are to love one another, and that requires contact and involvement in each other’s lives. But it’s not just because we are all children of God and should be reconciled with each other. It is especially for us who harbor grudges. It is for us that Jesus says this straight-forward communication should be done.

If you tell the one who wronged you how you feel about what they have done and describe the harm their action caused, you then give them the opportunity to ask for forgiveness. You initiate a process. If they deny it, or make too many excuses, Jesus says to take another person with you. I don’t think Jesus means a bodyguard kind of person to threaten the person at fault, but another believer who can potentially help the two of you speak the truth to one another. It is hard to ask for forgiveness. It’s more than saying the words, “I’m sorry.” When you have to apologize, just apologize. Don’t elaborate. Don’t make excuses, even if the excuses show it wasn’t really your fault. You may want to show you were well-intentioned, even if you didn’t fulfill your commitments. It’s more about you when you give excuses than it is about the other person.

As I’ve tried to apologize in this clean and clear way, I’ve found it is an opportunity to practice self-regulation. I can say it and shut up, instead of offering excusing myself. It’s also an opportunity to be responsible. Excuses are ways to evade responsibility. Whether I was late for a meeting or deadline, made a mistake, or unintentionally hurt someone, my behavior had consequences. My intention and all the external factors don’t change the consequences. And once I’ve apologized, I don’t need to do it again and again. Does this sound familiar to you? When you find yourself doing this, it’s also more about you than it is about the other person. You want to reassure yourself by repeating your apology. We want them to help us feel better about what we did. We keep shifting the focus back onto us. Jesus says don’t do that.

If there is someone who you know holds a grudge against you for something you did, or were perceived to have done, either recently or ages ago, Jesus is telling you to apologize and sincerely ask their forgiveness. Likewise, if there is someone who comes to you and asks forgiveness for something that has caused you to hold a grudge against them, Jesus tells us to grant them forgiveness. To ask forgiveness is not weakness. And to grant forgiveness is not to condone what someone has done. These are steps in reconciliation – the thing that Jesus did when He reconciled the whole world to God by hanging on the cross. If Jesus can do that for us, perhaps we can do this for each other, and for Him.

When and if the time comes for any of us to need to resolve a conflict that cannot be overlooked, I pray we have the faith, the courage and the common sense to act in the humble, loving spirit of Christ. When and if we are approached by a brother or sister seeking amends, I pray we welcome the input and reward the effort in that same loving spirit.

Bones are strongest at the exact place where they've been broken and properly healed, and so are relationships. We are reminded in Matthew 18 that a Christian life is not a solo-act and it is certainly not without pitfalls. And we have Christ's example. We have the Lord's instruction and encouragement. And more than that, we have His assurance that He is with us in every conflict. His love will see us through. Although we often quote "where two or more of you are gathered in My name, I am with you also" when we think of worship, or prayer for healing. But did you notice like I did that it is here in Matthew 18, here in the teaching on reconciliation between Christians that Jesus says: "*For where two or three come together in my name, I am with you.*" (Matthew 18:20) When we are working at forgiveness, Jesus says He is with us. Perhaps that can give us an uncommon confidence to begin the work.