

“Personal Conflict Resolution”

MATTHEW 18:15-17

**Baxter T. Exum (#1210)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
April 14, 2013**



This morning, I would like for us to consider an issue that seems to take priority (according to the Scriptures) even over the worship that we offer to God. It is hard to imagine that anything could possibly be more urgent than worshipping God, and yet the Bible does seem to indicate that there is something that should always happen first. In Matthew 5:23-24, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes a profound statement about the importance of our relationships with brothers and sisters in the Lord. In Matthew 5:23-24, the Lord Jesus said, ***“Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.”*** Jesus is saying: If there is tension between ourselves and another worshiper, that it is not possible to worship the Lord whole-heartedly, in sincerity and truth, until we have restored that relationship.

For just a moment, I would encourage everyone to glance around the room and consider the faces that we see in this room. The Bible says that our relationships with the people in this room have a direct effect on the relationship that we have with God. With that in mind, have we ever been hurt or wronged by a fellow Christian? Has a brother or sister in Christ ever sinned against us? If so, that hurt has a way of coming between us and the Lord. If we have been injured by a fellow Christian, that offense can have a profound negative effect on our relationship with the Lord. On one hand, we can allow that broken relationship to make us bitter and hateful or even vindictive and manipulative, but I would suggest that the Lord has a better way. With this in mind, I would like for us to turn together to Matthew 18 – Matthew 18:15-17 (p. 1533).

With the idea of healing relationships, the Lord Jesus puts forward a very simple plan. Today, as we think about our relationships, sometimes things seem so complicated, and yet we find in Matthew 18 that the Lord makes it incredibly plain and very simple. If you will, please look with me at Matthew 18:15-17,

15 If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. 16 But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Again, sometimes relationships seem so complicated, but when it comes to resolving any issues we might have with a brother or sister in the congregation, the Lord makes it simple with four very basic steps. Our lives would be so much more pleasant if we could just get back to doing what the Lord lays out for us here.

- I. **To begin with, if we have a problem with a brother or sister in the Lord, Jesus tells us that we need to start with a ONE-ON-ONE CONVERSATION. As the Lord tells us in verse 15, if we feel that someone has sinned against us, we are to “GO AND SHOW HIM HIS FAULT IN PRIVATE.”**

And I would point out right here at the beginning that most of our time together over the next 25 minutes or so will be spent in talking about this first step. First of all, because nearly all of us will need to take this step at one time or another. Secondly, because a vast majority of conflict can be resolved with this simple step. And finally, because out of the four steps that we will consider this morning, this is the one step that is ignored and neglected most often. So, we will be spending most of our time this morning on this first very basic idea, and that is: When we have a problem with somebody, the person who is offended (the person who is sinned against) is responsible for trying to make things right.

And so the idea is, if we are hurt by someone, and if it is serious enough for us to dwell on, if it is serious enough for us to brood over, if it is serious enough that we find ourselves wanting to mention it to other people, then we are the ones who are being called upon here to step out and try to heal the break in the relationship.

Now, based on what the Lord says here, I would like to make several suggestions, several observations. Notice first of all (in verse 15), that we are to go to the other person *“in private.”* The idea is, when we have a problem with somebody, the solution is to start small. Step 1, therefore, does not mean that we need to start by going to our friends. It does not mean that we should go to someone in our family, or to the preacher, or to the elders, but we are to go directly to the person that we have a problem with.

I have a suggestion here, and I am giving it to those of you who may be approached by someone who has a problem with someone else. When someone comes to any of us with a problem concerning another person, we need to ask them, “Have you gone to this person with your concern?” If they have not, then we need to encourage them to go to that person, because that is where Jesus himself told us to start. We need to be aware of the danger of bringing other people into the situation and contaminating their view of another person, causing long-term damage, when there is at least a possibility that we might have misread or misunderstood the other person in the first place.

It is so tempting, though, to start by going to a leader in the church, “Oh, you’ll never believe what so-and-so said to me or did to me! That woman has a real problem! You need to go talk to her! Someone needs to do something!” If someone here this morning is ever tempted to come to me about a conflict with another person, let me save you some time and a lot of grief: Talk to the other person first, because that is the very first thing that I will ask you to do. I have observed over the past 20 years or so that some people will come to me genuinely looking for advice concerning how to handle a situation. Others, though, will come basically to get sympathy. They want to be told how badly they’ve been treated, they want me to say, “Oh, poor you!” Some just want the sympathy.

The solution, though, is to keep the conflict as private as is possible. Just from a relationship point of view, think about what would happen if we start big. What if we were start by sharing with the entire congregation

and then if we were to work this plan backwards? By starting wide, by publicly airing our grievances first, we reduce any chance that the conflict might end peacefully. But, by starting small we honor the other person.

As someone who has done his share of offending, I can tell you from personal experience that nothing is more frustrating than to discover months or even years later from someone, who heard it from someone, who heard it from someone, that I might have offended someone. When we ignore what Jesus said here, we make the situation far more complicated and far more destructive than it needs to be. People have no idea how far their gossip and whining can spread, and that it will eventually make its way back to the person they slandered in the first place.

There is something else we need to notice in this first step, it is something we need to keep in mind throughout the entire process, and that is: The goal in all of this is to **“win our brother.”** The goal is not to win an argument. The goal is not to gain the upper hand. The goal is not to keep our pride in tact. The goal is not to pound a Christian brother or sister into submission. But instead, the goal is to **“win”** the other person. So I would make another suggestion here (with this in mind), and that is: When we make this first contact, we are to approach the person in a gentle and loving way – not with anger or malice, but we are to go with an open mind. We think about what Paul said in Galatians 6:1, if someone is caught up in sin, we are to restore that person **“in a spirit of gentleness.”** We are to treat the other person just as we would want to be treated – not as we think they have treated us, but as we would want to be treated. And so with that in mind, maybe we could say, “I really respect you as a friend, and several days ago I heard you say something, and I just wanted to check in and see if I really heard what I thought you said.” Or maybe we could say, “This is what I saw you do. What do you think the Bible says about that?” Or maybe we could say, “Brother, when you said that to me, it really hurt. What did you mean by saying that?” In other words, we do not go into the situation like a prosecuting attorney, but we approach the situation with love and concern for the other person. Our goal is to restore the relationship. Most of us who are married know that we can win an argument but still end up being the loser! We can win the battle but lose the war. We can win an argument, and then we might wish that we had not won the argument!

Some of you might be familiar with what is known as a Pyrrhic victory. We learned about it in Latin class, but as I remember it, Pyrrhus was a ruler from Greece who came over and started fighting the Romans about 300 years before the time of Christ. I remember from class that King Pyrrhus used trained elephants in battle (that is an entirely different story), but the account of history is that although Pyrrhus won the battle, he so significantly weakened his own armies that Rome eventually won in the long run. So, a Pyrrhic victory is a victory that comes at such a devastating cost that it really is not worth it – the heavy toll cancels out any real sense of achievement or benefit. So, as we approach a brother or sister who has sinned against us, let us keep King Pyrrhus in mind – our goal is not to win at any cost, but our goal is to restore the relationship. Our goal is to make things right between us.

With this in mind, I would also suggest that we go as soon as we have a problem. I have also learned from experience that any offense tends to get blown out of proportion the longer we put it off. We remember what Jesus said earlier about leaving our gift at the altar. We remember what Paul said in Ephesians 4:26-27 about not letting the sun go down on our anger, because, as Paul explains, by letting our anger percolate over time, we are actually giving the devil an opportunity. We are leaving an opportunity for the devil to come in and do more damage. It is important, then, to take care of things sooner rather than later before we allow some kind of evil thought about another person to fester and get worse over time. Generally speaking, conflict does not just go away on its own; but instead, it tends to build up and then explode. I’m thinking of my grandmother’s experience with green beans in the pressure cooker. One time we went down to visit, and they had an entirely

new kitchen ceiling. It turns out the pressure cooker had exploded. In the same way, little misunderstandings have a way of blowing up if we don't handle them sooner rather than later.

So, we have learned from this passage that when someone sins against us, we are to 1.) Go to the person privately, 2.) Our goal is to restore the relationship, and 3.) We are to go sooner rather than later so that the problem does not get infected and get worse over time. As I said earlier, if we do this, if we follow God's plan on this, chances are, this step right here will take care of a vast majority of issues.

From my own personal experience, Step 1 clears up probably at least 90% of all cases of interpersonal conflict within the congregation. If we could imagine this in some kind of a pie chart, when it comes to tension with other people, 90% of those cases can be cleared up with Step 1, if we just open a dialog with the other person, as the Lord has instructed. When one pulls aside another, usually it comes down to a misunderstanding. In many cases, the offender might have been doing something right that was simply misunderstood by the one who was offended, and the whole matter can be cleared up literally in just a few seconds. And then, in those few cases where an actual sin has taken place, the one who sinned apologizes, makes a commitment to change, and everybody goes home happy. Just talking about it will clear it up in a vast majority of cases.

It is amazing to me, though, as simple as the Lord makes it here, how hard this one step seems to be for some people. It seems that some people must enjoy being offended. It is so tempting to sit back and tell ourselves, "Well, if that person wants to come to me and beg and grovel for forgiveness, that's fine. After all, they're the one who made me mad." As Christians, though, we cannot wait for others to apologize. As the Lord said here, the burden in this passage is on the offended. If someone has sinned against me, I must go to that person to try to clear things up and work things out. The goal here is to follow the Golden Rule. We are to treat people the way we want them to treat us. All of us, I believe, if we were to say or do something that hurt another person, we would want that person to approach us privately, respectfully, and quickly. And that is what the Lord tells us to do here.

When somebody sins against us, if we go to them, hopefully we will have won our brother. However, what happens if this first meeting fails? What happens if they defend their sinful behavior? What happens if they just get angry?

II. In verse 16, the Lord tells us what to do if Step 1 fails. If it fails, we are now told to BRING SEVERAL WITNESSES INTO THE CONVERSATION.

As the Lord said, *"But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed."* My understanding of this second step is that it is to be done for the same reason as the first – the goal continues to be the restoration of the broken relationship. In other words (just to clarify here), the witnesses are not brought in in order to gang up on the person, or to scare the person, or to intimidate the person, but we are talking here about bringing in a mediator, a neutral third party, or maybe a mutually respected friend, maybe an older and wiser Christian, someone who is not going to be swayed by emotion, but someone who is able to bring the word of God into the situation. For this reason, when I am in this situation, I will try to set up a meeting not necessarily with one of my close friends in the congregation, not with someone who might naturally take my side on an issue, but rather, with somebody that the other person respects and someone the other person has some kind of relationship with. Again, the point is not intimidation, the goal is not to pound the other person into submission, the goal is not to embarrass the other person, but the point is to come to resolution.

I am thinking of the situation in 1 Corinthians 6 where the Christians in Corinth were taking each other to court in order to solve religious disputes within the congregation. We are not told the exact issues, but as I see it, one brother was perhaps suing another brother in the local court system concerning who gets to lead the opening prayer next Sunday. And Paul was upset that they were airing their issues before the world. And so in 1 Corinthians 6:5, Paul said, ***“Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren?”*** In other words, Paul was saying that disputes between Christians should be resolved within the church and that wise brethren should be able to help in those situations.

I would also point out here: Looking at what the Lord actually said in Matthew 18:16, it does not appear that the one or two we bring with us actually need to have been witnesses of the sin in question. Instead, it seems that they are to be witnesses of this second meeting. Remember: This is most likely a situation where somebody sinned against us personally. In other words, there might not even be witnesses to the sin in question. But instead, the one or two mutually respected Christians we call in are to be witnesses to the process. The ***“fact”*** that is to be confirmed here is that the person who was sinned against is handling the issue appropriately. If they witnessed the actual sin, that might be a little bonus here, but it doesn't seem to be necessary. The point is, they are to witness the process, they are to witness that the matter is being handled fairly.

Thinking about this second step: This meeting of 3 or 4 people will hopefully impress on anyone the seriousness of the sin. If it is truly a sin (and not just a misunderstanding), this would also help to remind the person of the danger they have put themselves in spiritually. It would remind them that this particular sin is no longer a private matter. In our culture today, we tend to leave other people alone. We tend to look at sin as someone's personal choice, and it is tempting for us to leave it there. But we know that sin is not just a personal matter – it affects our relationships – not only with God but also with our brothers and sisters in the church. The witnesses, then (if the person still refuses to change), would be able to testify during the next two steps that the process itself was handled appropriately. And again, just based on experience, if 90% of the cases are taken care of by Step 1, maybe 5-6% of the cases are squared away by Step 2.

III. But now, if there is a real sin involved, and if the person now disregards the offended party as well as the mutually respected Christian friends, we need to notice that Jesus tells us to take it now to a third level, and that is: We are told to PRESENT THE MATTER TO THE ENTIRE CONGREGATION. As Jesus said, we are to, “TELL IT TO THE CHURCH.”

By now, we are talking about only a small percentage of the cases. But by doing this, we allow the entire group to apply all of its collective talents, and wisdom, and judgment, and influence, and love to the situation. We have to remember that the church is a family, and when sin comes into our spiritual family, the family needs to come together to work through the problem.

The entire family is called upon to express their concern to the individual who continues in sin. Together, we urge the brother or sister to give up sin and return to God's plan for his or her life. Perhaps some who have been in that situation will be able to share the times when they were in that position and came back to where they needed to be. We certainly hope that one of our own would listen to all of us, but the Lord indicates that even this step will not always work, so the Lord introduces a next and final step.

- IV. According to the last part of verse 17, **“IF HE REFUSES TO LISTEN EVEN TO THE CHURCH, LET HIM BE TO YOU AS A GENTILE AND A TAX COLLECTOR.”** In other words, if he refuses to listen to the church, we have a responsibility to **BREAK OFF THE RELATIONSHIP.**

So we find here that there are some conflicts that cannot be resolved. Even after a personal meeting, and a meeting with respected friends, and even after being approached by the entire congregation, some people will refuse to change their behavior. And if it gets to this point, the Lord tells us that some kind of separation is called for. He tells us to treat the person like a Gentile and a tax collector. Does this mean that we need to turn away from them if we run into them on the street? Does this mean that we are to treat them harshly? Absolutely not! Maybe we need to ask: How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? He treated them with respect, and yet it was also clear that they were on the outside. In Ephesians 2, Paul referred to those who were gentiles as being ***“separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”*** The way I look at this is that the individual is no longer associated with the congregation. Last week we looked at the importance of being an active part of a local group. In Step 4 here, we have to make it clear: You are no longer a part of us. You are now on the outside. And the idea is: If you will not listen to me, or to our mutually respected friends, or even to the entire congregation, then I can no longer pretend that we are headed in the same direction. I can no longer pretend that we are on the same team. Things are not okay between us. We WANT things to be okay between us, but at this point it is not really up to US, it is up to THEM. This fits in with what Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica in 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, ***“If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”*** That seems rather harsh, but notice: We are not to be mean about it. The relationship is broken, but we are not to regard that person as an enemy. From that moment on, we no longer hang out with each other as if nothing is wrong, but we take every opportunity to warn and encourage the person to change.

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this passage, we need to ask ourselves: Do we believe what the Bible says in these three verses? As our creator, do we trust Jesus as he tells us to go to a person in private, then to go with several witnesses, then to take it to the church, and then, if necessary, to break off that relationship? If we believe what the Lord has said, we now have an obligation to put these words into practice, to implement the plan, to simply do it, as it needs to be done! This morning, I hope that all of us will respond to this passage with a promise to ourselves and to the Lord, and the promise is this: If I have an issue with another member of this congregation, I will not put it off, I will not drag other people into it, but I will resolve conflict by following God’s plan.

Lord willing, we will have more time to get into this next week, but I have seen this plan work time and time again. Sometimes we hear someone mention “church discipline,” and we might jump to the conclusion that we are talking about kicking somebody out of the church. But that is not really the case at all. Again, probably 90% of the cases get settled with Step 1. That right there is a form of church discipline. As we close, maybe we could imagine what it would be like to be a part of a group, a church family, where conflicts are resolved right away, as soon as they happen; and where people meet face-to-face with their concerns. That is the way God wants it to be. It is amazing how God’s plan actually works.

The love that we have for each other in the church is even stronger than the love that we have for our own physical families. If you would like to be a part of that, we would invite you to be a part of it starting this

morning. The Bible teaches that we are added to God's family when we believe in Jesus, when we repent of our sins, and when we allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, let us know. But if you are ready to make that decision right now, you can obey the good news immediately. We have an empty fiberglass tub downstairs. We can fill it up with warm water in about 20 minutes, and you can be immersed into Christ and your sins can be forgiven within the hour. If you want that to happen, you can let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com