

The Goal is Reconciliation 2020  
Matthew 18:12-17, 21-22

Matthew 18:12-17, 21-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. 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. Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

Several years ago I came across an article in a local newspaper  
about an elderly couple, life-long church members,  
who were voted-out by the leaders and congregation.

The retired couple owned and were leasing their store-front property  
to a business that was operating a popular bar near Camp Lejeune,  
and the pastor of the church considered it to be a sin  
to have any part of an establishment that served alcohol.

Even after the pastor found out and called them on it,  
they refused to break the lease and give up the income.  
Then later on, he brought along some of the church leaders  
and they were still unwilling to evict the bar owner-tenant.

The next Sunday during worship the pastor explained his concerns  
and publicly urged the couple again to repent and break the lease.  
When they still refused to comply with his demands,  
he called for the congregation to de-fellowship  
and vote to expel them from church membership.

In the newspaper article, the pastor explained that they were  
just following the instructions of Jesus according to Matt 18.

But as I study this passage within the context of the whole chapter,  
it seems clear to me that the pastor and his congregation  
were missing the point of what Jesus was trying to teach.

One of my favorite gifts and blessings about being a Christian,  
is the way that **the faith-relationship** we have through Jesus,  
can provide a way for God's gracious love to flow through us -

- **producing a unity that can overcome any differences that divide us.**

Yet at the same time

walking with Christ and being passionate about our faith  
doesn't mean that there won't be any friction or conflicts  
or that everybody will always agree on everything ---

-- so the question is, **how will we handle conflict and differences?**

Let me be clear up front, this is a very complicated topic,  
with no perfect solution or universal application  
that always fit every situation in all circumstances.

However, the Matthew 18 passage describes a process to help us

as those who've received the grace and salvation of Jesus Christ,  
when someone **within** the church hurts us or offends us. vs. 15

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.**

Matthew assumes that we can and will recognize the difference  
between someone sinned against you and simply being annoyed.

The whole point is reconciliation, to regain a lost relationship,  
as directed in Colossians 3:13,

Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

**The idea is forbearance**, we do for them because Jesus did for us-  
which means to hold back, be patient and maybe let it go for now,  
**because the relationship matters more than the offense.**

\* But, sometimes real harm and significant damage have been done,  
and that may require a more definite and significant response,  
something more than calm patience alone and simple forbearance.

If the offense is beyond what we can reasonably bear and overlook,  
if it is beyond what we can honestly forgive **without resentment**  
then those harsh hurt feelings may grow and spread,  
and could become destructive to our walk with God...  
if we're just calm on the outside but seething on the inside.

Point out the fault literally in Greek is "expose it to the light",  
or bring it out from the hidden and secret darkness  
so that it doesn't fester and contaminate from within,  
or hook me into perceiving myself as a helpless victim.

Though by nature and inclination,

most of us shun confrontation or dealing openly with conflict,  
but sometimes for the church's health and our spiritual growth,  
speak privately with that other person  
and at least try to make things right again.

we may need to

We don't approach them like a critical parent correcting a child,  
and we're not trying to compel a confession and shame,  
nor trying to prove, defend or insist on our point of view.

**The point is to build reconciliation and healthy relationships,**  
to replace my hurt-desire for revenge with hope for healing,  
and **do not allow** bitterness & resentment to reside in my heart...

... for it is possible that maybe I have misread the situation,  
or I may have misunderstood that other person's motivation.

Perhaps I don't know all the facts or other issues that are involved -  
- which I'll never know unless we talk **and I listen.**

Sometimes, however, some issues, anger, hurt feelings and damage  
simply run too deep and painful for a quick 1-on-1 resolution,  
so we move on to next step in the **reconciliation process.** vs. 16  
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.

It isn't to gather more people that I'm sure will agree with me  
or so that we can go after or attack that other person together...  
... but sometimes  
calmer heads to challenge us and our thinking are needed-  
- to ask, if perhaps I am making a mountain out of a molehill,  
- or how has my own attitude contributed to the discord?

This part of the process relates to the promise of Matthew 18:20,  
For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.  
That's why other people are brought in,  
so that gathered in faith, we strive to facilitate reconciliation.

At this next stage, there are more ears present to listen,  
more hearts open to hear and help discern God's voice,  
**and hopefully, more wisdom, experience and grace**  
**to move the situation toward healing and restoration.**

It is declaring, that this relationship **is important to all of us,**  
and by working together, **how can we get this to come out right?,**  
so that we are living out and reflecting the grace  
and the healing and hope of God who loves us all.

Even among the early Christians sometimes issues and hard feelings  
couldn't be resolved with a conversation among 2 or 3 believers...

... so in the next stage of the reconciliation process, vs. 17

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.

**This final step needs a little more explanation.**

When Matthew was written,

the early churches were 20-25 people who met in someone's home,  
and were more like a small group or Bible study than a big church.

They all knew each other, so the whole group would consider the issue  
to resolve for the sake of the church's continuing health & mission.  
It was not to publicly shame or punish when there were differences.

There is a key phrase in all of this, vs. 17

... let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

**So, how Jesus did treat gentiles and tax collectors?**

Didn't Jesus welcome even the most notorious sinners,  
and try to draw them toward God by seeking out the lost?

The idea is not three strikes and you're out,  
or to drive away those with whom we have differences & difficulties.

Jesus reveals and explains God's perspective in a parable,  
that immediately proceeds these verses of instruction, vs. 12-14

What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does  
he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?

And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never  
went astray. **So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.**

So even if we haven't worked out reconciliation and restoration,  
we still don't give up or abandon those with whom we disagree,  
and certainly do not try to push them away from the church.

We pray, we hope and keep on loving them toward their restoration,  
for it is not God's will or purpose that any should be lost,  
not even the most difficult, demanding or disappointing,  
but seek reconciliation & peace all the more strenuously...

**... as a practical exercise and application of God's grace,  
as a reflection of our Lord who never gives up on any of us.**

After Jesus gave these instructions, Peter asks, (vs. 21-22)

"How many times must I forgive a church member?"

and in response, vs. 22 not seven times, but seventy -seven times  
Jesus insisted, that **Christian forgiveness has no limits!**

Jesus never considered anyone to be hopelessly lost.  
Jesus never gave up on anyone, or wrote them off,  
not at any time ... and so neither should we.

**So where is the grace and Good News for us when we've been wronged?**

The truth is we are all sinners who fail and get things wrong,  
and since the Church is a gathering of many such sinners,  
of course we'll make mistakes and people will be wounded...  
... but God isn't going to give up on us, even when we're struggling...

**... and the Church is at it's most faithful and obedient best  
when there is room enough, when there is acceptance and welcome  
for all kinds of diversity, disagreement and differences.**

**That is an incredibly important truth, especially now,  
with all the tension of Covid and the rancor of politics.  
Here, we've got to stay focused on Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God**

Today we celebrate at the Lord's Table, a place of grace and family,  
as a visible sign of God's gracious love toward all ---

- for here, all are welcome and invited by God to share in the feast,  
as a sign of hopeful reconciliation & Christian fellowship,  
as we share in the Kingdom, the joy & mission of the Lord,  
**the purpose, truth and ministry to which we are called.**

And though sometimes  
we're not able to fully restore every wound & damaged relationship  
or reconcile every betrayal, disappointment and disagreement,  
yet as the Apostle Paul writes in Romans, (12:18, 16),  
If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all... Live in harmony with one another;  
do not be haughty ... Do not repay anyone evil for evil.