

Restoring Broken Relationships

Matthew 18: 15-20

Background material for the leader when preparing

Synopsis:

Matthew 18:15-17 details steps to take when you feel wronged by another person in the church. To understand these verses we need to study them in their context.

The chapter begins with a question to Jesus from the disciples about "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:1-14.) It reveals very human concerns about status and power and the very common tendency toward rivalry or jealousy within groups. In Mark 9:33-37 this "question" is portrayed as a "discussion" which Jesus was aware of the disciples having had about which one of them was the greatest and in Luke it bluntly states that "an argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest" (Luke 9:46.) In each instance Jesus responds by speaking about the kingdom belonging to children: those who do not consider themselves great but know themselves to be small and receive it humbly.

The verses on how to deal with those who have wronged us are followed by the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-35.) The crux of this whole chapter on humility and forgiveness comes in verses 21-22 when Peter asks Jesus "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.'

Commentary

Picture these scenes: A morning service on a bright Sunday in July, when the previous three Sundays have all been wet. Half of the congregation is on holiday. Most of the rest are soaking up the last hours of the weekend sunshine. Or, perhaps a cold wet night in the middle of February when only a handful of people have made it out to the midweek Bible study or prayer meeting. On either occasion, the minister, trying to be positive, opens by quoting from Matthew 18:20: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Those are probably the kind of situations in which we are used to hearing these words used. But is consolation at times of poor attendance really their purpose?

When read in their original context we discover that these verses actually contain a promise from Jesus to be with us when we are seeking to heal hurts in relationships between church members.

Most of us could probably identify an occasion when we felt wronged by someone else within the church. It may simply have been having our feelings or views overlooked when a decision was being made. It may have been something another person said to us - or about us - which caused the hurt. It may have been some action on their part. Unfortunately, such experiences are all too common in the church. When they occur, what should we do about them?

Matthew outlines a three-step approach:

- First speak directly and privately to the individual who has caused the hurt.
- If this does not bring about an acknowledgement of the offence and some repentance, then the person who feels wronged should take one or two other church members along to meet the offender. This is to be observers who can guard against it being "one person's word against another" and to help facilitate, if possible, some reconciliation between the estranged parties.
- Finally, if neither of those steps succeeds, then the person who has been hurt is to share it with the whole church in an attempt to help the person accused see his or her wrong and to heal the relationship between the two members. (What it might mean in practice to share it with the "whole church" today and how that can be handled in a way that leads to the healing of relationships are, of course, major questions that need to be explored.)

Up to this point in the passage it is clear that the twin goals are the restoration of the person who has committed the offence and the restoration of the relationship between that individual and the member who has been wronged.

If, however, after these steps the offender refuses to see his or her error or show any repentance when the church has sought to help that person do so, Jesus goes on to say to let that person "be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (Mt 18:17b.)

Given that both Gentiles and tax collectors were shunned in Jewish society it is understandable that this saying of Jesus has often been used as a justification for cutting such unrepentant offenders off from the church. And the verse immediately following it seems to add weight to any such decisions made by the church: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven," (Mt 18:18.)

What does it mean, though, to treat someone like a Gentile and a tax collector? If we are to answer that, we must look at how Jesus related to both. According to the New Testament far from keeping his distance from such people Jesus seemed to go out of his way in relating to them. Jesus called Levi, a tax collector, to be one of his disciples (Mt 9:9.) He was criticised by the Pharisees for dining with "many tax collectors and sinners" (Mt 9:10-13.) And when it comes to Gentiles we are reminded that Jesus used his power to heal the Roman centurion's servant.

Far from writing off such people Jesus reached out to them. And, if a Gentile or a tax collector responded to his call, that person was welcomed into his company.

What does that say to us, then, about the way we treat someone who offends us or another church member? Clearly, if Jesus left space for - even expected - the possibility of repentance, then those of us who "gather in (his) name" (Mt 18:20) must act in the same spirit. Even for those who are asked to leave the fellowship of the church because they do not admit their wrong in causing hurt to someone else or show any intention of repenting from it, the door cannot be permanently shut.

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Suggestions for a One-Hour Bible Study:

Matthew 18:15-20 Restoring Broken Relationships

You will need

Bibles; Flip chart or whiteboard and markers; pen and paper for each person.
Optional: Data projector and screen if you plan to use the PowerPoint slides.
Copies of the leaflet: 'Conciliation Service – a brief guide' available from the Deputy Clerk's Office.

Session Plan

A. Introduction: 10 minutes

Open with prayer.

If there are people who do not know each other, ask the participants to introduce themselves.

Ask participants on what sort of occasions in church life have they most often heard these words:

"Whenever two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them."

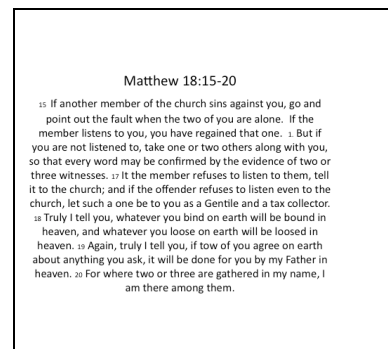
Accept all answers given and then feed back to the group the kind of occasions, which seem to be commonly associated with this text.

(See the Commentary)

(Advance to PowerPoint slide 1)

Ask a volunteer to read the passage for study:
Matthew 18:15-20.

Afterwards ask how hearing these verses in their original context changes participants understanding of them.



(Advance to PowerPoint slide 2)



After the responses given, remind people that the purpose of this series of Bible studies is to help us discover pointers for how we deal with disagreements in the church - and that these words of Jesus are actually a promise to be with us when we seek to do just that.

Making use of the Synopsis and Commentary provided for this passage outline the original context of this promise.

The final paragraph on page 1 may be helpful as an introduction.

Point out that this passage details steps to be taken when you feel sinned against or wronged.

Point out that before deciding to take any of the steps it is always important to reflect on and pray about such situations: Take some time to seek God's guidance and help.

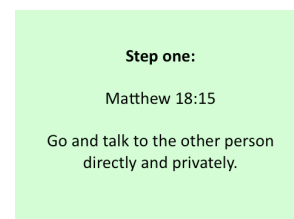
When doing so, it might be good to consider such things as:

- Is this a situation where I am simply called to forgive and let it pass, rather than make an issue out of it, or is it actually important that the matter be addressed in order for me to be able to move on, or to benefit the other person or to protect others in the future from similar hurt?
- Is there any way that I might have contributed to the situation, or it is clearly the case that I am the one who has been wronged?
- If it is important that the matter be raised, how can I do so in a way that will glorify God and help the other person, not just get satisfaction for myself?

Ask the group "If we conclude that it is an important matter to address what is the first thing Jesus says to do?"

Step 1: (Mt 18:15) (*Advance to PowerPoint slide 3*)

Go and talk to the other person, directly and privately.



This is not always appropriate. If it is a situation of abuse or there is a danger of being further harmed by a more powerful individual you should not raise a matter privately. However in most of our relationships doing so is the appropriate starting point.

Note that Jesus says privately. *Ask:* Why is that important?

Expressing how someone else hurt us to them privately not only protects their dignity and prevents a disagreement from spreading; it also is more likely to evoke an apology when one is due. To accuse someone of hurting you in front of others is more likely to make them defensive, not wishing to be seen by others as having misbehaved. When a hurt is pointed out privately, it is far easier for the other person to apologise.

Sometimes, when we go to the other, we discover that we have misunderstood the other's words or actions and no hurt was ever intended. Sometimes the other person realises how what they did do or say hurt us and apologises. If you discover you had taken up something wrongly and there actually was no offence or if that person listens to you, sees the hurt which he or she has caused and says sorry or changes, then you will have regained a brother or sister!

But, if actual hurt was intended or caused and the other person won't listen or doesn't respond with an apology, what does Jesus say to do then?

(Get participants to look at the passage and respond.)

Step 2: (Mt 18:16) (Advance to PowerPoint slide 4)

Take one or two others along with you to meet with that person.

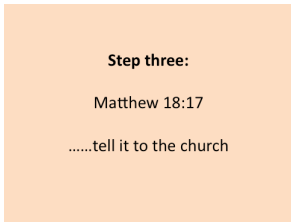
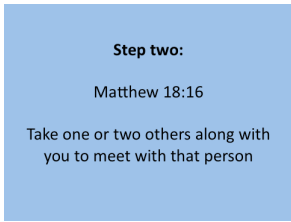
Make use of third parties to help both of you resolve the disagreement.

But, if the other person won't listen or doesn't respond even then:

Step 3: (Mt 18:17a) (Advance to PowerPoint slide 5)

Ask the group: What does Jesus say to do if even that doesn't work? *"..tell it to the church"*

Note that the underlying assumption is that the *church* is a place where disagreements can be acknowledged and, hopefully, resolved in a healthy way.



B. Putting Matthew 18 into practice - 45 minutes total.

7 minutes: Let's look again at verse 15.

Ask participants to form pairs or threesomes and list some of the unhelpful things people who feel wronged often do instead of speaking *directly* and *privately* to the person who has offended them.

(Examples might be complaining to others about what the person did, or remaining silent and letting the hurt fester inside until it eventually explodes, or avoiding the other person but not giving any explanation to them.)

After three minutes ask participants to briefly share unhelpful actions they identified. List them on the whiteboard or flip chart. (As you go around the groups ask that they offer only ones that have not already been mentioned by another group.)

(Advance to PowerPoint slide 6)

When your list is complete note that it is not surprising that disagreements often develop into unholy rows in the church!

Underline again the first step Jesus suggests in dealing with those who have wronged us: *speaking directly and privately to them.*

In other words, recognise the source of our hurt, take the initiative in moving toward that person and seek to resolve the disagreement.



(NOTE: You may wish to remind the group that in situations of abuse or bullying it is not advisable to the person being abused or bullied to go privately to the one responsible for the offence.)

15 minutes: Look again at verse 16: *"take one or two others along with you."*

Ask participants to discuss in pairs what their immediate reaction would be if they were asked to act as a third party in helping to resolve a disagreement between two members in their congregation.

(Advance to PowerPoint slide 7)

After 1-2 minutes, elicit their responses. Most will likely be quite hesitant about doing so. Next ask: What might you be afraid of? (Examples might be: Being out of my depth, losing either party as a friend, taking sides, becoming emotionally involved, being manipulated, eating up a lot of time.) After about three minutes invite responses from the small groups.

What would your immediate gut reaction be if you were asked to act as a third party in helping to resolve a disagreement between two members of your congregation?

Note that while it may not be everyone's calling, if Jesus tells us to use others, some of us need to be willing to be used in this way.

Next, ask them to work in their pairs/threesomes to list what they think might be important guidelines to follow if they were asked to do this?

(Advance to PowerPoint slide 8)

After a further four minutes ask the pairs/ threesomes to share their list with the whole group.

(Hopefully they will include such things as:

- *Listen carefully*
- *There are always at least two sides to every story*
- *Our role is not to judge - we are not there to decide who is right or wrong but help the others to reach an agreement about a way forward*
- *I may not be the most suitable person to get involved*
- *Keep confidentiality*
- *This is their problem and they are the ones who have both the responsibility and power to sort it out – not me. I can only help.*

What might be some important things to remember if you were asked to do this?

Write their points up on the whiteboard or flip chart.

If there are any that some participants don't understand or have questions about, allow time to discuss them. You may as a group end up changing or even removing some of them.

Remember: True reconciliation leaves nothing further to be reconciled. To reach this point everything which rankles in a person or persons must be brought out with honesty. Too many solutions to disagreements are superficial and "bad blood" remains under the surface. *Ask the group:* Do the guidelines you have suggested address the need for such honesty or making sure all that needs to be discussed is raised?

(An alternative way of looking at this step might be to give two or three conflict scenarios and describe three possible third parties you could invite to become involved in each situation, then ask pairs to

choose which they feel would be best to approach and explain their reasons for selecting that person.)

5 minutes: Look again at verse 17a: "tell it to the church."

Note again that an underlying assumption in this passage is Jesus' understanding that the church is a place where disagreements can be raised and dealt with constructively. One of the reasons some disagreements are not resolved or resolved in a healthy manner can be that people don't know where to go for help or don't do so when they should.

Our denomination has various structures for dealing with disagreements. This may involve use of a judicial process in one of the courts of the church at Session, Presbytery or even General Assembly level. However the Presbyterian Church in Ireland also has a Conciliation Panel of ministers and lay members who have been trained to be invited in as third parties to help groups, congregations or presbyteries work together at resolving disagreements that have arisen. Using such help can resolve disagreements at an early stage, privately and without many of the negative aspects of a judicial process (i.e. Judicial processes being very time-consuming, disputes going public, the outcome most likely having a winner and a loser, etc.)

Use the leaflet: 'Conciliation Service – a brief guide' available from the Deputy Clerk's Office to share about this option and how it works.

Sadly, the experience of PCI is that often parties involved in a dispute wait far too long to avail of the help that the church can offer through the Conciliation Service. Doing so makes conciliation much more difficult for the parties and for those working with them. It is so important that conflicts are not allowed to fester but rather are addressed in a timely manner.

(5 minutes) **OPTIONAL VIDEO:** This could also be a good point to show the video clip – Session Five / Christ's Heart of Compassion produced by PCI: The link for it is: <https://vimeo.com/album/3533632/video/135551738> It lasts for 4 minutes 41 seconds. This includes comments from one congregation on their experience of using the Conciliation Service.

These verses from Matthew not only assume that there will be conflicts in the church but also that there may be times when one party in a dispute will not see that there has been any wrong committed and make amends for it or be willing to refrain from continuing some unacceptable action.

Ask, What does Jesus say to do next if we have used all three of these steps and it hasn't worked?

(In verse 17b Jesus says that when that is the case we should let that person be to us as "*a Gentile and a tax collector.*")

3 minutes: Ask participants for *immediate* reactions in their own words as to what this means. As participants call them out, list them on the chalkboard

or flip chart. (Answers might include: "Kick them out," "Shun them," "Avoid them," etc.)

5 minutes: Ask participants to recall in their own words any sayings or stories from the gospels about Jesus actions toward Gentiles and tax collectors.

(If they have difficulty coming up with any ask them to look up Matthew 9:9, Matthew 9:10-13, and Matthew 8:5-13.)

Note that we need to view this statement (vs. 17b) in terms of how Jesus treated tax collectors. Even if we reach this step, we must still keep the door open. The twin goals of this teaching by Jesus about how we treat those who have wronged us are:

- that the person who has caused the offence may be restored, and
- that our relationship with that person may be restored.

6 minutes: In groups of 3-4 identify ways in which we can "keep the door open" even when the other party shows no signs of repentance or when as a last resort action has been taken to officially remove that person from office or membership.

(Some examples might be to pray for them; write to them, if they refuse to meet you face to face; invite them to take up some role (other than an office/position from which they have had to be removed) in the life of the church, etc.)

After four minutes invite ideas to be shared with the whole group.

4 minutes: Summing up:

Acknowledge that we have been concentrating on how to relate to someone who has committed a wrong toward us or another person. At times the wrong can be perceived rather than actual - e.g. the result of a misunderstanding. In such cases it may be the one feeling wronged needs to acknowledge their inappropriate perception and apologise for any misplaced annoyance they may have felt or expressed.

Point out that there are two other admonitions in the New Testament that we need to keep in mind along with this passage from Matthew 18.

The first is found in Matthew 5:23-24:

"When you are offering your gift to at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

If we are conscious that we have wronged another, we are to take the initiative in going and being reconciled to them.

The second is in Colossians 3:13, *"if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."*

When another asks for our forgiveness after we have pointed out how we have been wronged – and even if they don’t – our commitment to Jesus calls us to express forgiveness.

C. Conclusion and Closing – 5 minutes

Look again at verse 20. Ask: Now that we have explored this passage, where would you say the two or three referred to here are and what are they doing?

(Seeking to resolve a disagreement between themselves or between two others in the manner Jesus has been teaching.)

Recap the main points from this passage:

(Advance to PowerPoint slide 9)

5 key points from Matthew 18:15-20

- Deal with the situation directly and privately, if possible
- If this doesn't work, use others to help
- If this doesn't work, use the church, which has processes and resources for assisting during times of disagreement.
- Seek the restoration of the offender and your relationship with that person
- Remember Jesus' promise: "When two or three are gathered in my name.... I am with you"

Maintaining Healthy Congregations requires that, when we feel we have been wronged, we

- Deal with the situation directly and privately, if possible.
- If this doesn't work, use other individuals to help you.
- If this doesn't work, use the church - which has processes and resources for assisting during times of disagreement.
- Continue to seek the restoration of the offender and of your relationship with that person, no matter what distance has been created between you. (Read or ask a volunteer to read Matthew 18:21-22. Acknowledge that Jesus teaching on forgiveness is very challenging. As those rooted in Christ maintaining healthy congregations also requires that we be prepared to forgive others *and* to confess our fault and seek forgiveness when we are the one who has wronged another.)
- Remember Jesus promise in verse 20 that " where two or three are gathered in (Jesus) name" he is with us as we seek to heal broken relationships.

Close with prayer

Suggestion For A Talk With Children

If using these notes as the basis for a sermon, you may wish to consider a book called "The Hurt" - Teddi Doleski, Paulist Press, 1983. ISBN 0-8091-6551-1. (Available on *amazon.com* not on *amzon.co.uk*)