

Resolving Conflict  
Matthew 18:15–20  
Sunday, September 10, 2023

Let us pray: May we hear, Lord, not just with our ears and our minds, but with our *hearts*, that our lives might be transformed by your word, in Christ. Amen.

There is this great scene in the movie *Doubt*<sup>1</sup>, where Philip Seymour Hoffman plays a priest and Meryl Streep plays a nun who is *convinced* that he has done something wrong. She has no proof, but she *knows it*. She has been talking to one of the other nuns about her concerns, and the priest has found out that she has been talking about him. So he preaches a sermon that I'm just going to quote for you now. He stands up in the pulpit in front of the whole congregation, and this is the sermon:

A woman was gossiping with a friend about a man she hardly knew – I know none of you has ever done this – and that night she had a dream. A great hand appeared over her and pointed down at her. She was immediately seized with an overwhelming sense of guilt.

The next day she went to confession. She got the old parish priest, Father O'Rourke, and she told him the whole thing. "Is gossiping a sin?" she asked the priest. "Was that the hand of God Almighty pointing a finger down at me? Should I be asking your absolution? Father, tell me, have I done something wrong?"

"Yes!" Father O'Rourke answered her. "Yes, you ignorant, badly brought-up female! You have borne false witness against your neighbor, you have played fast and loose with his

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<sup>1</sup> [Doubt \(2008\) - IMDb](#)

reputation, and you should be heartily ashamed!” So the woman said she was sorry and asked for forgiveness.

“Not so fast!” says O’Rourke. “I want you to go home, take a pillow up on your roof, cut it open with a knife, and return here to me!” So she went home, took a pillow from the bed, a knife from the drawer, took the fire escape to the roof, and stabbed the pillow. Then she went back to the old priest as instructed.

“Did you gut the pillow with the knife?” he says.

“Yes, Father.”

“And what was the result?”

“Feathers.”

“Feathers?” he repeated.

“Feathers everywhere, Father!”

“Now I want you to go back and gather up every last feather that flew out on the wind!”

“Well,” she says, “it can’t be done. The wind took them all over.”

“And *that*,” said Father O’Rourke, “is *gossip!*”

And that is the entire sermon. He ends it there. The idea being that when your words go out into the world, you cannot get them back, so you should be careful what you say. Now, that *might* be a really good illustration of gossip. But in the movie, he wasn't really preaching it to the whole congregation. He was preaching it to the nun played by Meryl Streep, as a way of saying, "I know that you've been talking to people about me. You better be careful."

Rather than *her* going to *him* with her concerns, and rather than *him* going to *her* when he found out, they brought all these other people into their problem. The psychological term for this is *triangulation*. I have a problem with you, but I don't go straight to you to talk about it. I go and talk to this other person in an attempt to turn them *against* you and get them on *my* side. When I do that, I have created a triangle, instead of a straight line of communication. Or I have done something to hurt you, but you don't come to me to talk about it. You go to Ridgley and say, "Could you talk to Patrick about this for me?" Triangulation never actually *resolves* the conflict. It only leads to *more* conflict. And Jesus understood this.

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Jesus says to his disciples, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." Now, a little background here about the context in which Jesus is saying this. Chapter 18 started off with the disciples coming to Jesus and asking, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus brings in a child and says, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like a child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Then Jesus goes on to warn against stumbling blocks. Don't cause someone else to stumble in their faith, and if something is causing *you* to stumble, then you need to get it out of your life. Then he tells a story about a shepherd who has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone

astray, so he leaves the 99 behind to go find the one who is lost. “So,” Jesus says, “it is not the will of God that one of these little ones should be lost.”

Now, of course, Jesus is not just talking about children there. He is talking about our life together as his followers. He is saying that his followers need to be humble and teachable like children. He is saying that we must attend to matters of personal morality, so that they don't become stumbling blocks in the paths of others. And he is saying that we have to cultivate care for one another. So if we hurt someone or cause someone to stumble in their faith, like that shepherd we have to seek them out in humility to bring them back into the fold, because God does not want *one of us* to be lost from the life of the community.

It is *then* that Jesus tells them what to *do* when they seek out that other person in humility. He says, “If another member of the church sins against you” – and actually he doesn't say “another member of the church.” The Greek says, “When your *brother* sins against you.” For the purposes of including *women* in that, too, it was changed to “member of the church.” But what we *lose* when we say *that* instead of the familial language of brother and sister is this sense that, we're not just “members of the same organization,” we are part of the same *family*. We *belong* to each other. We are responsible *for* and *to* each other.

So, “When your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” Don't go talk to someone *else* about it. Talk to *them*, in private. “If your brother or sister listens to you, you have regained that one.” Because it is not God's will that any one of us be lost, right? “But,” he says, “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.” This is not *triangulating*. This is, “We have tried to work this out one-on-one, and that didn't work, so now

we're going to bring in others to help." But this is only *after* we've tried to work it out one-on-one. Finally, Jesus says, "If your brother or sister 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." We'll come back to that last part in a bit.

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Now, we *hear* this and probably think, "This is a good, healthy way to resolve conflict." My question to you is, do you think this could still work today? Let's say that I have done something to hurt you. I realize what I have done, and I go to you to apologize and make it right. But you say, "No, you really hurt me, and I don't know if I can trust you again." That's fair. So then I go and get John McClintick and Nancy Arico, and the three of us knock on your door and say, "I have brought them to help us resolve this conflict." How are you going to respond to that? Let's say that you are not receptive to that. So then I stand up in worship one Sunday and tell the whole congregation everything that has happened. Everyone in the sanctuary looks to you and says, "How can we help you resolve this conflict?" But by that point, you have already gotten up and walked out of the sanctuary, probably never to return again.

We live in a culture in which we have become so *individualized* that the rights of the individual supersede everything else. A culture in which, "Who are you to tell me how to live?!" If I or another member of the church sees that you have a serious problem with alcohol or drugs, and I come to you in humble, sincere love and care and say, "We need to talk about this. I think you need some help." How are you going to respond to that? It would not surprise me if the response was something like, "Who do you think you are?! That is none of your business. How dare you! I'm leaving the church!"

If you find out that one of our Elders is having an affair with another member of the church, and you go to them and say, “You are an Elder. This is totally inappropriate behavior. We need to talk about this.” How do you think they might respond to that? Unless you know them *really well*, chances are they might not respond well.

But what Jesus is getting at here is that we belong to each other, and together we belong to God. We are called by God to live life together. Sometimes we disagree and have problems. When we *do*, we are called to resolve that conflict in ways that reflect our love and care for each other. And we do *everything that we can* to make it right. We don’t give up on each other. We’ll see him emphasize that even more next week.

When Jesus says, “If you do all of this, and they still refuse to listen to you, let them be like a Gentile and a tax collector.” We often take that to mean that if we do everything Jesus says, and they still aren’t willing to resolve the conflict, then that’s it. We’re done with them. Don’t have anything else to do with them. But, how did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? He *ate* with them. They were his *disciples* (there were Gentiles and tax collectors among his closest followers). Just a few chapters earlier, in Matthew 11, Jesus is described as “a *friend* to tax collectors and sinners.” He did not give up on them but loved them and lived life with them. Because it is not God’s will that even one of these little ones should be lost.

So we don’t give up on them. In humility and love, we keep seeking them out because as followers of Jesus Christ, we believe that *everyone* can change. Every single person can be transformed by the healing power of the risen Christ.

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Now, obviously, if we are in a situation where our physical safety is being threatened or we are being mentally, emotionally, or spiritually abused, Jesus is not telling us we have to just stick it out and keep subjecting ourselves to that. There are some times when the best that we can do to seek resolution to a conflict is to *pray* for that other person. To sincerely ask God to bless this person and give them what they need to be whole. To ask *God* to somehow bring healing to the conflict between you. Even when it is not safe or wise for us to continue being physically present with this person, what Jesus is saying here is that we *still* do not give up on them. Even if all we can do is pray for them.

Jesus says in verses 18 and 19, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” Now, of course, Jesus does not mean here that if you and I come together and pray for millions of dollars, God will give us that. We have to remember that this is all being said within the context of resolving conflict in the life of the church. So there is a sense in which we can understand this as saying, “When you come together and pray for this conflicted situation, God will be at work in it.”

But there is also this difficult part about *binding* and *loosing*. To *bind* something is to hold onto something and not let it go. To *loose* something is to let it go. What Jesus is saying to his followers here is that what we hold onto on earth will be held onto in heaven, and what we let go of on earth will be let go of in heaven. Jesus says this a different way elsewhere, when he says, “If you *forgive*, you will be *forgiven*. If you do *not* forgive, neither will you be forgiven.” “Blessed are the *merciful*, for they will *receive* mercy.” We will be held to the standard that we hold others to. We will be judged the way that *we* judge.

Remember, this is all being said within the context of resolving conflict. It is saying, “We should do *everything we can* to resolve the problems between us with humility and love,” and to remember that we don’t have to do it *alone*. That we are part of this larger community of faith; we have this *family* around us to help us. *And*, Jesus says, *he* is with us.

The last thing he says here, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” We often talk about that in terms of Christians physically gathering together; that if there’s only two or three of us in worship or a prayer group, hey that still counts! And that is definitely true. When we come together in the name of Christ, the risen Christ is present with us. But the Greek word that is used there is the word *su-neg-MEN-oi*, and it can be understood to mean, “brought together.” *Wherever two or three are brought together in my name, I am there among them.* “You are divided. There is conflict between you. But when you are brought back together, I am in your very midst.”

In a highly individualized culture, we are called to remember that we do not do any of this alone. Christ is with us, and we are with each other. So we work for reconciliation and healing. We do everything we can to make right that which is wrong. Douglas Hare says it this way, “The two or three gathered in Christ’s name meet in the knowledge that they belong to the risen Christ, and his watchful eye is over what they do. When two alienated Christians, with or without a mediator, come together to work toward a reconciliation despite all the anger and hurt that separate them, they are humbled and strengthened by the awareness that Christ is in their midst.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew (Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*, pg. 215.



If you are in conflict with someone, go to them, seek them out in humility and love, and work for healing. If you need help, ask for help. It is God's will for all of us to live life together as brothers and sisters, sheep of the Good Shepherd, mindful of Christ's promise to be with us *always* and give us what we need to live the fulness of life. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.