

A STRATEGY FOR RECONCILIATION

Scriptures: Matthew 18:15-22; 18:10-14

For many generations of Christians this scripture passage has been like a manual on church discipline. This is especially true because of an omission in verse 15. Look at verse 15 in your pew Bible. It says, “If another member of the church sins against you,” and after the words “against you” there is a footnote. The footnote explains that some of the oldest Greek manuscripts of the Bible omit the words “against you.” Thus it would read, “If another member of the church sins [at all!], go and point out the fault.”

Some of our Presbyterian ancestors were really big into this. Lately I have been reading quite a bit about John Calvin, the reformer who established the first Presbyterian style church in Geneva, Switzerland. John Calvin was so serious about this scripture passage that the consistory in Geneva, which was like our church session, regularly summoned people to appear before it to answer for the sins they had committed that week. For example, in 1548 a young man named Jean Frochet was summoned because he had been seen hanging around with a bunch of bums who spent most of their day drinking. This young man was summoned before the equivalent of our church session and told to go home, obey his parents, and clean up his act. Another man, a hatmaker named Marquet, was summoned because he had hit his wife during a marital dispute. Calvin personally called this guy on the carpet in front of the whole council and told him never to treat his wife that way again (Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life*, p. 124).

I'm telling you, we could have much more exciting session meetings if we pursued this scripture passage the way Calvin did. But then we run into other scripture passages from the Gospel of Matthew, like Matthew 7:1 where Jesus himself says, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.” There is also the parable Betsey read last week about the field that was planted with wheat and weeds, and the owner said, “Live with the weeds.” Jesus clearly told his disciples not to go around trying to root out all the weeds, all the sinners, from the church, because if they did they would also tear out a lot of the wheat. So what are we to do with this scripture passage which seems to suggest that if any church member sins we should haul them before the church and kick them out if they don't repent?

The key to this scripture passage is relationships. That is why most Greek manuscripts of this scripture passage include the words “against you” in verse 15 and all the manuscripts quote Peter saying in verse 21, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?” This scripture passage is not about going around and finding sinners to haul before the session. It is about reconciling broken relationships in the church family, or even in our own families. In Greek verse 15 says literally, “If *your brother* sins against you, go and point out the fault.” Admittedly the word “brother” is often used in the Bible for a brother or sister in the church family, but it can also mean a personal brother or sister. This scripture is about reconciling broken relationship whether in your own family or in the church family.

To that end I think there are five principles that we can learn from this scripture passage. I call them strategies for reconciliation.

Principle #1: Take the initiative. This principle is at the heart of the parable of the lost sheep that we heard in our first scripture lesson. The shepherd does not wait for the sheep to come back. The shepherd does not cross his arms and say, “When that sheep comes back maybe I will accept him.” The shepherd takes the initiative. The shepherd goes looking for the lost sheep. Likewise, Jesus says, if another member of the church sins against you, don’t sit at home waiting for them to apologize. Go seek them out.

There have been occasions, not a lot thankfully, but a few occasions when people have quit coming to our church because of something I said or did. In some cases I knew what it was, and I tried to apologize or at least explain, and sometimes that helped and sometimes it didn’t. But in some cases I did not realize I had hurt someone. I did not know how my words or actions had affected them. I needed them to come and tell me.

I realize that when you have been hurt, really hurt, to you the wrong is so obvious you cannot imagine how anyone could miss it. But friends, I am here to tell you that sometimes we miss it. Sometimes the people who have hurt you do not realize what they have done. That’s why Jesus says, “Go.” Take the initiative. Do not wait for the other person to come to you.

Principle #2: Confront directly but sensitively. Jesus says, “Go and point out of the fault when the two of you are alone.” In other words, don’t talk about people behind their back; talk to them face to face. Reconciliation happens not when you talk *about* people but when you talk *to* them directly.

Ah, but how you talk to them is important. Jesus says, “Go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” The point of talking to people alone is to avoid embarrassing them or putting them on the spot, to lessen their defensiveness. Jesus never tells us to avoid confronting people. I would say that both of the people whom John Calvin confronted—both the young man who was hanging out with drunks and the man who had hit his wife—they needed to be confronted. But how it is done makes a difference.

At this point allow me to make a pastoral suggestion. This is not in the Bible, but I think it applies to this principle. When you confront someone who has hurt you, it is best not to make sweeping objective statements. Do not say, “You always ___” or even worse “You are a ___.” Such statements invite defensiveness. If you say to a person, “You are a jerk,” they will respond, “I am not a jerk; you are a jerk.” How far does that get you? But if you say to a person, “When you do _____, it makes me feel this way or it does this to me”—if you take the focus off the person’s character and on to the way their actions affect you—it changes the dynamic of the conversation. It forces the person to respond to your concerns instead of some prosecutorial judgment on their character.

But sometimes that does not work either, which brings me to Principle #3: When stuck in a stalemate, get help from others. This is my loose paraphrase of verse 16 where Jesus says, “But if you are not listened to, take one or two others with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” This sounds almost like a trial, like you are conducting some kind of hearing before the session. But that is not the idea, at least not at this point. At this point the matter is still private. But even in the struggles of a private

relationship it helps sometimes to bring in another person as a reality check, a way of helping each of you see the situation through different eyes. This is where counselors can be helpful, occasionally even pastors. An outside person can help both of you see aspects of the situation you may have missed.

But even that may not work, so we come to Principle #4: Learn when to let go and let God. This is my rather loose paraphrase of verse 17: “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 sounds like “shunning”—the process used in some Christian groups to kick people out of their church and exclude them from any social contact. But interestingly, that is not how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors. Jesus regularly ate with tax collectors and on several occasions gave healing to Gentiles. Jesus did not shun Gentiles or tax collectors, so he cannot mean that we should shun the people who don’t listen to us.

But he does mean this: he means that you cannot control what other people do. That is my most frequently repeated mantra in pastoral counseling: you cannot control what other people do; you can only control what you do. You can reach out to people, you can talk to people, you can even seek counseling and invite them to go with you, but you cannot make them reconcile. In those situations you have to let go. You have to do what you know is right, what you know is faithful to God, whether the other person does or not.

But even then you are not helpless, which brings me to Principle #5: Keep praying. In verse 19 Jesus says, “Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” Once again Jesus suggests bringing someone else into the situation with you. He does not say that you have to put it on the prayer chain. He does not say you have to announce it during the prayers of the people. But he invites you to ask someone to pray with you, again so that you can have a reality check, another person to help you make sure you are praying for the right thing.

And here is the promise: God will hear. I am not sure I completely understand the part where Jesus says, “Whatever you bind on earth will be found in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” I am not sure I understand what that means. But given how it is followed by the verse about praying, it at least means this: it means that when you and someone else or you and the church family pray for someone, it will be heard in heaven. The desire that you have for reconciliation on earth is shared by none other than God.

There is a bumper sticker that says, “I don’t get mad, I get even.” I think Jesus would rather you got mad. Jesus would rather that you got mad and confronted the person who has hurt you. But then he wants you to let go of getting even.

- Ken Onstot
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