

Matthew 18:15–20

15 “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.

16 But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’

17 If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

18 “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

19 “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

20 For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

Someone shared a story of when Dolly Parton was working on the film *Steel Magnolia*’s with Julia Roberts. Dolly, you may know, grew up in extreme poverty as one of twelve siblings in the Appalachian Mountains.

The film was made in the South and it was unbelievably hot on set. On the first day Julia Roberts complained. The heat continued and the next day she was even more vocal in her grumbling and complaints. All this time, Dolly said nothing. By the third day she was so exasperated that she petitioned Dolly to join in the complaining and Dolly responded saying.

Oh honey, I’m just pleased to be here’

That’s the gospel in one sentence.

If you have heard and responded to Jesus you’re the son and daughter of a King and he’s extended to you the keys of his kingdom to you entirely by and through His grace.

If everyone was able to extend grace then Jesus wouldn’t have needed to equip the disciples as he did in this teaching.

Jesus is addressing his disciples – believers- and he’s also anticipating the birthing of His church – but it’s not yet birthed. This isn’t a remedy for office conflict or an overbearing boss - although I hold that Jesus’s wisdom may be hugely helpful with a tricky colleague or extended family member.

Some of you may have read secular management or leadership books and one of these is Susan Scott’s ‘*Fierce Conversations*’.

She notes:

“Our work, our relationships, and our lives succeed or fail one conversation at a time.”

That’s where Jesus begins.

Clearly. the first and most important reckoning is between you and Jesus. You need to respond and have what Cartier-Bresson calls ‘the decisive moment’. When you

comprehend who He is and what He has done for you at the Cross. In Matthew 18 - what Jesus is addressing is how we are to reckon with each other. Particularly when a wrong has occurred between people.

This section of Jesus teaching is all about restoration and reconciliation. We think so individually in today's culture. This is all about us becoming a reconciling, healing beacon to a lost world.

We've some work to do.

How we deal with each other matters.
It matters deeply.

If we are obedient to how Jesus tells us to love and forgive each - others will come to follow him through that witness. That should be reason enough to sort out our differences and of course when we don't its hugely damaging.

The human need for forgiveness appears to be indelible. We need to be people who both grant forgiveness and receive forgiveness.

Three steps to reconciliation:

Step one: Private confrontation

Step two: We call on the help of Witnesses

Step three: We call on the help of the wider church and it's elders.

Step one is about the one to one.

15 "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over."

The confession of sin is a sign of spiritual life and vitality. But it's rare. The quickest and easiest way to sort a problem out is to sit down with the person who has wronged you face to face. Generally, we don't do this. William Barclay commenting on this verse in the 50's - today he'd include emails *'More trouble has been caused by writing letters than by almost anything else'*.

Don't write – see the person face to face if you can. That's hard though with someone who has wronged you. You may feel intimidated or fearful which is to be expected. What we often do instead is find an ally who sides with us and gossip about the other person. I call it going on covert operations.

Go and point out their fault. Jesus says 'go' implies we seek out the person with kindness. Plan A is to seek forgiveness and to receive it.

This is about a distinct wrong – a lie or a slander for example.

I read a lot about revivals. They always seem to begin when people get honest with God and each other.

On New Years Eve in 1843, in a Lutheran Parish in Mottlingen in Germany a young man came to the door of the churches' pastor – Johan Blumhardt. He unburdened himself in confession of many sins and misdeeds. These were major and minor. The man experienced huge relief and word of it spread. By the end of January 35 people had come to unburden their consciences with the pastor and ask for God's forgiveness. By mid-February over 150 has done so.

A historian noted:

'Stolen goods were returned, enemies were reconciled; infidelities were confessed and broken marriages restored . Crimes, including a case of infanticide were solved and alcoholics found sobriety'.

Lovely example of the granting of forgiveness igniting a movement of justice that impacted a whole community.

If you need to travel lighter then make time to come and see me.

Step two: The Witnesses and help of others.

16 But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'

This is a ref to Duet 19 v 15 . Sometimes a dispute needs others. Some things need the clarity of facts and details. I've done this a few times helping people untie the knots.

Step three: Go to the wider community.

17 If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

This can't be a tirade against Gentiles or tax collectors. Jesus has called a tax collector as a disciple and healed a Canaanite women. Jesus never sets limits to human forgiveness. This is not an injunction to abandon the person – it is a challenge to win them with love that can touch even the hardest heart.

Just to say this is very rare. Sometimes the elders or Senior clergy need to be involved. Needs to be done compassionately, wisely and with much prayer. Deeply complex and I'm not sure I got everything right.

The motive is never to seek condemnation. It is to seek repentance and restoration.

The verse about binding and losing is about the word of God. The gospel frees. We are tasked each or us with sharing it. The disciples here are being given authority.

What is being loosed? God's word.

Now the final verse.

19 “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

20 For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

Once when he felt the heaviness of his problems rather than the joy of God's presence renowned theologian and author Henri Nouwen and sought spiritual direction for Mother Teresa and this is how he retells the encounter.

“I remember I was visiting Mother Teresa in Rome. Everyone wanted to talk to her and I wanted to see her too. I went there as I had some problems. I had some personal struggles, quite a few actually, and I wanted to ask Mother Teresa how to deal with that. I brought all my stuff to her. I just talked about all my problems then she looked at me and said if you spend one hour a day in adoration of your Lord and never do anything that you know is wrong you'll be fine. Obviously she didn't say anything that I didn't know but suddenly it hit me is so true and so coming from the right place that that little word was enough for Me it begs the question what does an hour of adoration look like for mother to raise as she explained to one report, it looks like wasting time with God when you pray what do you say to God? The reporter asked? 'I don't say anything' she replied. 'I listen'. What does he say? The reporter shot back eagerly. 'He doesn't say anything he listens and if you don't understand that I can't explain it to you

She later wrote this. She said everything starts from prayer without asking God for love we cannot possess love and still less are we able to give it to other others.....To be able to bring his peace joy and love we must have it ourselves for we cannot give what we have not got.'