

The Christian Manual on Effective Conflict Resolution
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Matthew 18:15-20 (KJV)

¹⁵ Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. ¹⁶ But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. ¹⁷ And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglects to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. ¹⁸ Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

I don't know about you, but this is one of those passages that I struggle with in the King James Version. I think more modern versions provide practical understanding and opportunities to delve into it. Here is the same scripture from the CEB:

¹⁵ "If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together. If they listen to you, then you've won over your brother or sister. ¹⁶ But if they won't listen, take with you one or two others so that every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ But if they still won't pay attention, report it to the church. If they won't pay attention even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector. ¹⁸ I assure you that whatever you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. And whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them."

A little easier to digest. Here's another version, The Message:

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ "If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you've made a friend. If he won't listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. If he still won't listen, tell the church. If he won't listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love. ¹⁸⁻²⁰ "Take this most seriously: A yes on earth is yes in heaven; a no on earth is no in heaven. What you say to one another is eternal. I mean this. When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action. And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I'll be there."

As usual, depending upon the version of scripture we read, there are lots of differing words and alternative possible interpretations.

So, what is Jesus talking about here?

1) Sinning, disagreeing, quarreling, dissention, arguing and conflict. Not in general, or abstractly, but specifically, conflict between two individuals.

2) AND ... Jesus talks about how to handle it – not JUST “forgive and forget” techniques or beliefs, but the actual, difficult words and actions involved with confronting and addressing conflict - NOT via social media or texts – but actually in person, face-to-face.

Basically, Jesus has provided to us “The Christian Manual on Effective Conflict Management.” The question left is whether we use it or not.

In this passage, we begin with “IF.”

IF sin/conflict happens. So, it’s not guaranteed in this passage, but clearly, God and Jesus understand humans and conflict. So not if, but **when** it does happen, Jesus prepares us.

- When your brother, your sister, your siblings, a fellow believer or some companion...

It’s very specific isn’t it? The Greek specifically uses the word, Adelphos, which is “brother;” not siblings, fellow believers, etc., that’s us, yet again, interpreting and expanding. Wouldn’t it have been better if Jesus had simply said “someone?” That way it clear that this instruction could be applicable to *anyone and everyone*, who sins. I firmly believe that it says “brother,” not for reasons of patriarchy or toxic masculinity (while there is a lot of that in the Bible), but rather it’s because in the eyes of God and Jesus, all of humanity are siblings, brothers and sisters in God’s creations. For this passage, It doesn’t matter if you’re male/female, believer/non-believer, or family/stranger. This instruction is to everyone experiencing dissention with anyone and/or everyone else. It’s meant to guide everyone in our relationships with our siblings in creation.

- When someone sins against you.

Sin? Is this passage really talking about words or actions that are on the level of sin, like murder? That level of moral infraction? Maybe...but maybe not. That’s why I think we can appreciate the various scriptural interpretations that are offered - sin, trespass, hurt or “does you wrong.” The original Greek however, says SIN. So, it demands that we understand and explore what SIN is. This is no small feat and it’s certainly not something I can speak to adequately in less than 10-15 minutes. I mean, I **CAN** offer a 15 minute sermon on “what is sin” and I **CAN** provide a one sentence answer as to how I define sin based on my readings of scripture and my relationship with God, but that’s just it – it’s MY understanding. To appreciate Jesus’ lesson and instruction, we must all engage an even deeper conversation on how narrowly or broadly we each define and understand “SIN?” Defining SIN is easy BUT, it can also be extremely difficult. It’s not always black and white.

Is killing a sin? ---- But what if it’s in self-defense? What if it’s during war? What if we’re talking about killing a bug?

Is lying a sin? --- But what if you did to save someone’s life? To save their feelings?

Is hurting someone’s feelings, sinful?

Is unintentionally causing someone emotional or physical discomfort, sinful?

Is innocently saying or doing or not saying/doing) something that results in another person feeling hurt – is that a sin?

If Jesus really used the word SIN, might he have been just a bit hyperbolic? To what degree of SIN is Jesus speaking?

This instruction from Jesus is told from the perspective of the one who has been sinned against, the sinnEE, not the sinnER. So, it's up to each and every one of us to evaluate and determine if our being hurt is really on the level of a sin. This SIN can be very difficult because it sometimes calls us to distinguish one's actions versus their intentions.

We're in political season. There are many slogans, mottoes and catchphrases filling television screens, magazines, newspapers and social media. Racism, the economy, immigration, poverty, the environment, gun rights, abortion – all difficult topics on a normal day – but during political season, they seem to escalate emotions and reactions. Innocent comments get taken out of proportion, misinterpreted and mangled into completely different words. In the era of “fake news,” SIN is being redefined on a regular basis; it's hard to know or trust anything or anyone anymore. This is why it's good to have Jesus' wise words and guidance.

- When someone sins/trespasses/does wrong or hurts you, tell him his fault/correct them/go and work it out – have it out ... between the two of you.

Go to the horse's mouth!!! It the first rule of quality communication imparted by therapists, teachers, parents, pastors and more. If someone has sinned against you – GO TO THEM. Just the two of you. No one else. Tell that person how you feel and why you feel that way.

Notice that in the words and tone of this passage that it doesn't speak of blame or fault, right or wrong. If you think about it, it's not included because it doesn't really matter. It doesn't talk about proving or verifying the sin, “did that person REALLLY sin against you?” Whether the SIN is true or not, you FEEL “sinned against. So go to them, **confront** them. That's the hard part for most of us. Confront someone – face to face – who we believe has sinned against us, hurt us.

- If they LISTEN to you, you have gained/won them over/made a friend.

LISTENING IS KEY to conflict resolution. Jesus gets straight to the point when handling conflict....one on one dialogue and LISTENING. I'm sure you've all heard the saying, “you have two ears and one mouth because you're meant to listen twice as much as you speak.” We have a hard time listening on a regular basis, but when there is a conflict....? We let our emotions take over. Our anger, our pain, our frustration gets right in there and even when we go to our sisters and brothers, even when we're ready to take the difficult steps of engaging conflict, we ruin it by not listening. YOU'VE been sinned against, so you have a lot to say to the SINNER. So, say it. We want to be heard. When we feel heard, the anger, pain and frustration start to subside and conflict turns to restoration....when we listen. It's equally important that for redemption and restoration to happen, both parties have to listen, so that both can feel heard. The focus is not about winning, but reconciling.

- If you are not listened to/if you are not heard

God knows us so well! We can be so stubborn and ornery. And sometimes, flat-out wrong! IF you try to work it out and they don't listen to you Take two or more with you. You mean I should escalate it? According to Jesus – why involve two or more others in this issue? **So that every fact may be confirmed.** Jesus says, bring in a few others, so as to keep the dialogue honest and factual. This is really an unspoken commandment, “Thou shalt not triangulate.” Unbiased, objectivity can be very helpful. “The ‘one or two others’ who are involved in [this] second stage...are presumably not witnesses to the original offense. Their function as witnesses to the

confrontation between the accuser and the accused is twofold: they can protect the accused if the accusation is too harsh or based on a misperception or inadequate information; they can protect the accuser and observe how the accused responds to the charge.”¹

- If THAT doesn't work, then what? Take it to the church / the congregation

Really? Why take it this far, Jesus? Aren't we beating a dead horse at this point? You feel Sally sinned against you. You went to her and she wouldn't listen. You took Jacob and Sarah back with you to ensure honest and factual communication. Sally still won't listen. And now go to the church?? To what end? If Sally won't listen, then I'll just be done with her and move on.

Uh, uh, uh – not so fast! Go to the church, first. If after taking this to the church and Sally STILL won't listen, then be done with her and move on. Jesus doesn't say it so nicely, though. Jesus says to treat them like a heathen or tax collector. In other words, ostracize them.

Hmmm... involve the entire church?... be ready to ostracize them?... That seems pretty harsh, especially coming from Jesus.

It does and it is to emphasize Jesus's point. When handling conflict and sin, Jesus is talking about sin within a community. While it may be Sally sinning against Burt, it really is more than that. It's a severe stance because the "transgressions ... envisioned [in this passage] are serious offenses that affect the spiritual health of the congregation as a whole.”²

We modern Christians so often think of sin as an individualistic concept, but Jesus and those in his time saw sin and relationships differently; as communal and interdependent. Sins, disagreements and conflicts between individuals threatened the entire body of Christ – they were destructive of the church's fellowship. Never forget however, that Jesus hung out with sinners and tax collectors.

- Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again, I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Jesus ends by hammering home his point. What you bind or loose on earth, will also be done in heaven. So, be bound together – resolving conflicts strengthens relationships, the church and the community. Jesus reminds us that when we get together to talk, listen and hear – when we work toward redemption and restoration, God is pleased.

We are sinners. God knows it. And God still loves us. We know this because God sent us Jesus Christ, who taught us how to fight against sin and work through conflicts with one another. Jesus is interested in the way we relate to each other and his teaching reminds us of the important of truthfulness.

We're human – it's going to happen. Someone is going to upset you, intentionally or unintentionally. It can happen as easily as "liking" something on Facebook or declaring support for one political candidate over another. Regardless, if you feel "sinned against," go to one another. LISTEN to one another. Hear each other's

¹ Hare, Douglas R. Interpretation: Matthew. Pg. 214.

² Ibid. Pg. 213.

words, hearts and souls. May we always remember to gather in Christ's name and abundantly offer one another grace, mercy and forgiveness.

AMEN