

Living with People Like Me

Matthew 18:15 -35

The first few months of coming together as one fellowship we need to make a real effort to get to know and love one another, so for a few weeks I would encourage you to use the nametags provided in the vestibule. I would also encourage you to invite one another out to Sunday lunch or over to your home for dinner. Mariko and I are inviting someone over each week so we can get to know all of you personally. There is nothing like eating together and sharing your testimony, the story of your Christian life, to bring us together. When we share our journey we realize we are one in Christ. Will you make that effort to dine together on both the physical and spiritual food?

Today I want to share with you some very practical pointers from the words of Jesus. Jesus said very little about how the church was to function. But looking forward into the future of believers gathering together after His ascension, our Savior saw the need to point out one thing in detail. It was probably obvious from seeing relations amongst the 12 that we, His followers, would need explicit instructions on how to deal with problems that arise between us.

Matt 18:15-20 (NIV)¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."¹⁶ But if he 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 he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."¹⁸ "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."¹⁹ "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven."²⁰ For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

Notice in verse 15 the Lord began this by saying, *"If your brother sins against you..."* The one who feels wronged needs to make the first step. The word 'hamartano' (sin) means to miss the mark with you. That is a very broad term. I would think it means anytime someone has wronged you or offended you by his or her words or actions. Why is the offended one to make the first step to be reconciled? The offender may not be aware of the offense. Even if he is aware, if he is the offender it probably does not bother him as much as it is bothering you. You are the one that is having trouble loving him because this issue has caused you to have hurt feelings. So Jesus wisely tells us the offended one needs to go and show him his fault.

Jesus warned us that it was impossible not to offend but added *"woe to him by whom offenses come."* If we love one another we will try not to be offensive. The declaration of "woe" comes because the offender is offending someone God loves, made in God's image. James warns us that this is why we should not speak against our brothers, they are made in God's image. (James 3:9) The offender is liable

toward God and sins not only against his brother but also against God. So Jesus encourages us to get the issue straightened out right away. (Matt. 5:23,24) Go talk it out, don't let it fester. The author of Hebrews tells us that a root of bitterness can grow and trouble you and defile many. (Hebrews 12:14,15) When we let it fester it spills from our lips and affects others and pulls them into the conflict. But Jesus said, "...*just between the two of you.*"

Here is where 90% of reconciliation efforts go awry. Our feelings have been hurt and so we gather support and sympathy. That is great in a physical need but with a wounded spirit it is pure poison. It is nearly impossible to relay the story in an unbiased way. Our friends, who heard the story from our wounded perspective, then tell others with their own perception of what happened. Then that second or third hand version gets back to the offender. "What?" He says, "I never said that!" Now both of you are offended and the original offender gathers support for his perception of the story, and round and round it goes. Sin leads to death. How many people were supposed to know? JUST 2! It seems almost impossible for man to keep it that way, but if Jesus told us that is the way to do it, He will give us the strength to do so IF we will yield to Him.

If you will follow this clear cut instruction from Jesus you will find, most of the time, the problem will stop right at this point. Let me give you a tip as to how to relate to someone in a way that will help him or her be more receptive. Going on the attack always puts up the others' defenses. Instead of saying "you", express what you felt. i.e. "I was hurt when I heard the words..." not "You said ... and that's a lie!" Put yourself in their shoes. Which would you be more receptive to? If you can sit down and talk with that gentle approach and a genuine desire to clarify and listen to each other, 9 times out of 10, the problem will stop right there. The miscommunication will be resolved or an apology made.

Galatians 6:1 tells us the spirit in which we should go about doing this. ¹ *Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.*

The one who has offended you has been caught in sin, even if it is a sin of the lack of love for their brother. The 'spiritual' person goes to the offender with a motive of restoring the relationship and with the fruit of the Spirit, gentleness. The world does just the opposite. The one who is bringing correction does so authoritatively and often harshly. Consider yourself lest you be tempted to speak without love. Then you are guilty of the very thing you are confronting the original offender with. I've seen this played out a hundred times. If you can't go in the spirit of Gal. 6:1 pray for the Lord to change your heart so that you can. Consider yourself lest you end up being guilty too.

Like all areas of life, Jesus modeled this for us. Peter had betrayed Him, sinned against Him. After Jesus was resurrected and met the disciples in Galilee, He called to them from the shore. Peter dove in and swam to Him. It was just the two of them by that charcoal fire. Jesus gently asked, "Do you love me?" Is that your idea of confronting someone who has sinned against you? It should be. Jesus didn't meet with the other disciples and explain how Peter had promised to stick with Him.

He didn't turn everyone against Peter because He publicly denied with curses that He ever knew Jesus. Just the two of them, with the gentleness of those words, "Do you love me?" It is so much easier to confess to one person the fact that you have not been humble and loving than it is to have to say it in front of whole group of misinformed opinionated people. Lord help us respond with humility like Peter did.

The hardest words man ever said, "Forgive me, I was wrong." If you didn't mean to offend, you can still ask for forgiveness for being insensitive. God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourself. If there is anyone you don't want resisting you it is Almighty God, so humble yourself. The spiritual person is quick to say, "I am sorry" and mean it from his heart.

Again, look at Jesus. He forgave the men nailing Him to the cross, yet we quit speaking to one another over mere words. We need the Spirit of Christ, the mind of Christ, to be ready to forgive. Because of what Jesus did for you, you are accepted by the Father. It doesn't matter if man accepts or honors you. When that sinks in, deep in your heart, you have an unshakeable peace. You don't need man's approval. If that is what you are seeking then your heart is in the wrong place. Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness... (Matt 6:33)

Today people are trying to be healthy by having a sense of self-worth. When you know God loves you so much He gave His only Son for you then you have God-worth. You are worth so much to God! Listen to Romans 8:32. ³² *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*

Refuse to be offended! But if you are, then ask for God's love and mercy to forgive. Go one on one, to gently share your hurt with the offending person.

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

Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 19:15 where in legal matters guilt or innocence were determined by two witnesses that agreed on what happened. You remember that in Jesus' trial the witnesses didn't agree. Now how many know? Only 3 or 4 at most! You are not bringing them to beat up on the guy, but to be a witness to a dispute. If they cannot clarify the issue or help the brother see his wrong, if there is a stubborn refusal to be reconciled then it goes to the whole church. We see this only a few times in the writings of the Apostle Paul. One was in 1Timothy for false teachers and once in the letter to the Corinthians for immorality. In both cases the people that sinned were delivered to Satan. In other words, the church removed God's protection and let them be dealt with so they will face the destructiveness of their ways. These are serious offenses with serious life and death consequences. The minor things were resolved at level one or two by talking it out in love.

If the church could not help them see the error of their ways they were to *treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.* Our first reaction is to think that means with harshness, but how did Jesus model that? How did Jesus treat pagans and tax collectors? As friends! He didn't treat them as the inner circle, those he could teach more spiritual matters, nevertheless they were treated with love to win them over. They are out from under the protection of the body and so they face the

consequences of sin in the world, the pain and devastation of life without God. But the reason they do is to turn them from their selfish ways and bring them back into the fold, humbled and renewed. That is exactly what happened with the young Corinthian man.

In the continuation of this passage, Matthew 18:21, Peter thinks through the practical application of this and asks, "What if someone offends you over and over and keeps asking for forgiveness?" The common rabbinical answer of the day was three times, so Peter wanting to enter into the spirit of what Jesus is teaching suggests 7 times. To his surprise Jesus says 7 times 70! Then Jesus tells a parable that we need to listen to. I think we are too ready to chop up Scripture into little fragments leaving the flow behind. This parable flows out of Jesus talking about how we are to live with one another in the church. Keep that in mind as we go through it.

Matt 18:23-35 (NIV)²³ *"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.*

Every time you see a "therefore" look back to see what it is there for. This is an explanation on willingness to humble ourselves to ask for forgiveness and to forgive. This is a picture of what the kingdom of heaven is like.

²⁴ *As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.²⁶ "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.*

God is so gracious to us! We come to Him and confess our sins against Him and He looks at the payment His Son made for you and cancels the debt. We take that for granted too often. What a wonder and how grateful we should be!

²⁸ *"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.*

This is a man whose fellow servant was indebted to him. When we sin against a brother, offending them, we become indebted to them. We, too often, react just as this servant did. God has forgiven us a debt we could never pay, and we take some miserly debt a fellow servant owes us and make it a capital offense! The amount he was forgiven was millions of dollars, but for a few dollars he was ready lock up his fellow servant. How illustrative of the disparity of what we have been forgiven and the little amount we refuse to forgive others. We lock them up in the jail of condemnation. We insist that he pay up, make it right!

³¹ *When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.*

³² *"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.'³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'*

Well, shouldn't you? Do you see how clearly this applies to anyone in the church who feels they have been wronged? That is why I say, "Refuse to be offended!" God cancelled such a great debt for you and I that we have no right to hold the tiny amounts owed to us against anyone. We should pass on that generosity. We should be like our Father, following His example. Isn't that what Jesus taught us after His prayer when He said, *"for if you do not forgive people their debts neither will your Father in heaven forgive yours."* Matthew 6:14,15

I read you this last verse with a holy fear of a just God who gives to everyone what they have sown. He is God who warns us that the measure we use for others is the one that He will use toward us.

³⁴ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

"But wait, I'm forgiven!" Yes, but there are consequences in this life for sin, especially when you have heard the declaration of God against your attitude. Especially when God has been so gracious to forgive your mountain of debt toward Him. *³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."*

From your heart! We can only do that by asking the love of God to fill us and change our attitude. Then we need to follow the practical steps to resolving the conflict between us that Jesus outlined for us.

Think about this: Jesus didn't describe what church government should be like. He didn't tell us how to order our church service. He only mentions the word "church" twice in the Gospels. Here and in chapter 16 when He says He will build it Himself on the truth that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Of all the things He could have laid out in detail for the future church, His body, He told us how to resolve conflict.

As His church we are obligated to take this instruction of Jesus and live it to the very best of our ability. We need to agree that this is the way we will resolve all future conflict and any lingering conflicts. We need to commit to this because Jesus' way is the best way for all involved. If we call Him Lord then we better obey what He tells us. Can we agree this morning that this is how we will respond when we are offended? When someone comes to you and starts to speak against a brother or sister – to relay a story of being offended – will you with purpose and intention of obeying your Lord say, "Wait, have you gone to that person one on one?" Then continue on down the procedure Jesus outlined? If they have then are they treating them as friend trying to win them back into the family of God? Can we commit to not letting human tendency to get people on our side, continue to plague our relationships? If we will all stand on this Word then those who join this fellowship in the days to come will hear our resolve. They won't have to be taught this truth because they will see us live it!

Let us pray together for the help of the Almighty, the conviction of the Spirit, and the power of resurrected Life, to walk in the light of this truth.