



We-Harmony: Biblical Conflict Resolution
Matthew 18:15-35

I. INTRO

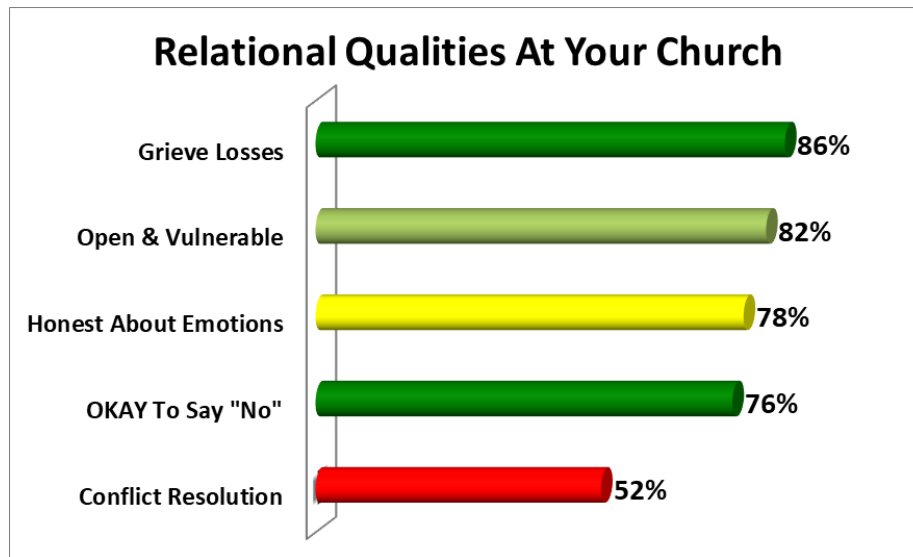
A. Vision Sunday is next week.

1. I won't be able to speak to specific vision—I'm here to be with you as you listen to God. I can speak to general vision, however.
2. Based on being here since Sept and interacting regularly with staff and elders, as well as the unpacking the content of the VitalChurch report I do think it would be worthwhile to spend an extended season examining the doctrine of grace.
3. Our culture tends to view grace as overlooking the faults of another (and sometimes this perspective leaks into the church), but grace is not just pardon it is also power.
4. I hope you will make every effort to join us next Sun.

B. Today we will be looking at what the Bible has to say about conflict resolution. Here's what we know...**Conflict is inevitable – it's not about IF there will be conflict in our lives (or in this church) it's more about WHEN there is conflict.**

C. I have come to view every conflict as an opportunity. (Our family...)

D. Also, I wanted to show you a graph from the recent VCM report...



E. Two asides...

1. We have made available to you a bulletin type insert that will be worth your time. **14 Brief & Basic Conflict Guidelines** that detail good and practical communication practices that will work across the scope of your relationships. (Today will be more of a theology of conflict resolution, the insert is more practical application oriented.)
2. Also, one of the recommendations from the diagnostic report is that we would like as many people as possible at CCC to read *Making Peace by Jim Van Yperen*. I like his book because he takes a systemic view of conflict. "The PRESENTING issue is hardly ever the REAL issue..."

- F. With that said, I will read Matthew 18:15-35, (p. 816) then pray, and we will consider what Jesus is saying to us today. I'm reading from the NASB: *If your brother [or sister] sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ "Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst." ²¹ Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my*

brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”²² Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

- G. Then beginning in v. 23 we have the account of the Merciful King and the Wicked Servant. The King forgave the Servant a multimillion-dollar debt, but the Servant would not forgive a fellow Servant a debt of a few hundred dollars. The highlight of this account is found in v. 33: *³³ Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’*

II. BODY

- A. **Takeaway: Conflict is both inevitable and an opportunity. We can either react to conflict or respond to conflict. Biblical conflict resolution involves clarity, forgiveness, and mercy.**
- B. I see vs. 15-35 divided into 3 sections—each section with a 1-word descriptor. I will give them to you (again) and then we will go back and look at them one at a time. We will see that there is to be:
1. **CLARITY (vs. 15-20)** (or a clear process)
 2. **FORGIVENESS (vs. 21-22)**
 3. **MERCY (vs. 23-35)**
 4. We could also view these as **CLARITY** (or a clear process) in the context of ongoing FORGIVENESS and MERCY.
- C. One at a time...
1. **Vs. 15-20: CLARITY** (or clear process)
 - a. When conflict happens, it must be dealt with promptly. Our natural tendency to look the other way and pretend it’s not there – hoping that it will just go away. But it doesn’t. Conflict that is not attended to quickly is like a **neglected infection**, and sooner or later it will engulf the entire organism.
 - b. Unresolved conflict can do great damage to us as a church as well as to our witness as a church. For that reason, **Jesus, Himself, gives us very clear and specific instruction.** Jesus tells us with unambiguous CLARITY what to do when there is conflict between the members.
 - c. Our goal in resolving inevitable conflict is never to be retaliation or vindication, but always reconciliation. We want to both show and honor Jesus Christ in our healed relationships.

d. We see **Step 1 in v. 15: “If your brother [or sister] sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.**

- 1) We don’t **circulate**, we don’t **inflate**, we don’t **inflamm**, but the first step is to go and humbly talk to the person one on one.
- 2) Included in Step 1 is seeking to identify if we each person has a clear understanding of what happened. (“Seek first to understand and then to be understood.” –Prayer of St. Francis)
- 3) I would like to point out that in these conflict resolution steps there is both an **informal process** as well as a **formal process**.
 - a) **Informally**, we could engage Matt 18 in a home group if someone says something that hurts your feelings or that you think is untrue -- or in the **church hallway** if we were to overhear a brother **speaking harshly** to his wife or his kids. Again, informally we might come-up alongside the person from the home group and say, “You know, I have a different view of the circumstance you spoke about...” – or come alongside the brother in the hallway and ask, “Is everything okay, you seem a little bit uptight today??”
 - b) A more **formal** process might occur if some habitual sin, like gossip or any forms of abusive behavior, regularly surfaces in a person’s life.
- 4) The main idea of Step 1 (or v. 15) to seek to settle the miscommunication at the lowest level possible where each person feels heard and respected.
- 5) **“Help me understand...”** is a great intro to what could be a difficult conversation.
- 6) But what if it doesn’t work?

e. **Step 2 – Go in two’s (v. 16) But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.**

- 1) ****This is where it can get harder, or messier. Often times it “feels” so much easier to talk to someone we feel would be more on “our side” of the conflict (which becomes gossip or**

triangulation) than it is to actually talk to the person we are having the conflict with.

- 2) In the text the idea of the word *listen* is that the other person either doesn't **hear** what you're trying to say, doesn't **listen**, or doesn't **understand**.
 - 3) The "witness" or "witnesses" should be impartial and are to delve into both party's perspective of the conflict.
 - a) A *witness* could also be someone who has experienced that other person in the same way—but we don't want anyone to feel ganged up on.
 - b) If this is the case, there should be a mutually respected and impartial third party.
 - 4) What if Step 2 doesn't work?
- f. *Step 3 (v. 17) If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*
- 1) Tell it to the church. This DOESN'T mean that we talk to all our friends in the church! Every church needs to do the work and decide what this means biblically.
 - a) Some churches believe, and I tend to agree, that this means it's taken to the elders if there's an impasse.
 - b) A basic rule of thumb concerning communication is that public sins need a public response and private sins remain private.
 - 2) The role of the elders is primarily 3-fold: Doctrine, Direction (vision), and Discipline. Again, the elders are to get involved if there's an impasse.
 - 3) The goal is always to: **Help people find and build a holy consensus and unity that will express the reconciliation that God has brought to us in the Person of Jesus Christ.**
 - 4) The gospel is to be expressed in the way we deal with one another.

- 5) Sometimes, in the case of habitual and unrepented sin, it is necessary for the elders to inform someone they are in great spiritual danger.
 - 6) The NT describes **three basic categories** of sins that most often reach this level of seriousness¹:
 - a) **Spreading major doctrinal error (e.g., 1 Tim 1:20)**
 - b) **A major moral failure (e.g. 1 Cor 5)**
 - c) **Persistent divisiveness (e.g., Titus 3:10)**
 - 7) What Jesus is saying here is that to protect His Church, He has provided us with a very clear guiding process.
- g. What is the purpose of this 3-step process?
- 1) The primary reasons are rescue and reconciliation. **We are willing to engage in uncomfortable conversation in order to rescue and reconcile people due to our own sinful behavior OR from being victimized by other people's sinful behavior.**
 - 2) The whole purpose of this process is to **gain** a brother or a sister.
- h. V. 17: What does it mean to treat someone as *a Gentile and a tax collector*?
- 1) ****This is a very important concept for us to understand. I think the overarching issue here is **TRUST**. The Jewish people did not trust Gentiles (i.e., occupying Romans) or the Jewish tax collectors, who were working for the occupying Romans.**
 - 2) What Jesus is saying here is that an unwillingness to see and own our sin – even after the elders have weighed in -- causes the church to no longer trust that the person desires to be **part** of the local church “family” and, possibly, in need of **conversion**.
 - 3) We are to remove **unrepentant persons** from access to the sacraments as well as from social relationships related to the church's mission—**not** a general shunning of all social contact.

¹ D.A. Carson, *Editorial On Abusing Matthew 18*, Themelios, May 2011, Vol 36, Issue 1.

- 4) The purpose of church discipline in all its forms is not to punish, but to **call forth repentance** in order to **recover** the straying person.
 - 5) **Ultimately, there is only **one sin** for which a church member is excommunicated — **an unwillingness to repent**. When there is genuine repentance, the church is to declare the sin forgiven and begin a reconciliation process that will lead to restoration. (Easters?)
- i. We have one more question to ask of the text in this section. What is Jesus saying in Matt 18:18? *Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.* [This v. is VERY often taken out of context!]
- 1) Here's what it means: The ruling authorities (usually the elders) pray a solemn prayer that **removes the church's covering** from the unrepentant sinner/s. Paul applies this disciplinary action in both 1Cor 5 and 1Tim 1:20...
 - a) *"I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."* --1 Corinthians 5:5
 - b) *"Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme."* --1 Timothy 1:20
 - 2) This is not an angry, reactive, pugnacious determination, it is a humble and sorrowful response to sin with a longing for full and complete repentance, reconciliation, and restoration.
- j. Matthew finishes this section by emphasizing the need for church discipline to be exercised in the context of **continuous forgiveness** and **extravagant mercy**...
2. **Vs. 21-22: FORGIVENESS** (fairly easy to see and understand)
- a. We see Peter attempting to be generous by offering to forgive someone seven times (he doubled the Jewish standard of three times and added an extra).

- b. Then Jesus lovingly says, “Not exactly Peter – it’s 70 x 7 times.” The idea here is that if we actually tried to keep track, we would lose count along the way.
 - c. *Forbearance* is a word found mostly in the KJV of the Bible.
 - 1) The idea is that God has shown great forbearance with us and we are to show forbearance with one another.
 - 2) We find a good example of this in Colossians 3:12–13: *“Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another”* (KJV).
 - d. Here is something you may not have thought about before: **The goal of this biblical process of conflict resolution is ultimately about our mission as a church.**
 - e. We want others, even outside the church, see the gospel in operation as we continually pursue forgiveness and reconciliation with one another.
 - f. The separation that can happen in church can have eternal consequences for some people when we don’t follow the biblical processes laid down by Jesus for His Church.
3. **Vs. 23-35: MERCY**
- a. We are to extend the same mercy we have received from Jesus Christ at the cross to one another.
 - b. Luke 7:47 tells us that those who have been forgiven much will love much.

III. CONCLUSION

- A. Making Christian disciples involves a whole range of activities for nurture, instruction, and training. To produce mature disciples, Christian learning, devotion, worship, righteousness, and service, are all to be taught in a context of mutual care and a growing accountability (Matt. 28:20; John 21:15–17; 2 Tim. 2:14–26; Titus 2; Heb. 13:17) among the other believers.
- B. ***But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.*** –1 Tim 1:5 (emphasis added).

C. Communion...

1. Three questions:

- a. As we prepare our hearts to celebrate the Lord's Supper the obvious question is, "Are you relationally at odds with anyone at this moment?"
- b. Another question is, "Is your conflict hindering the furtherance of the gospel?"
- c. Are you aware that someone is unreconciled with you?"
- d. *"If you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering."*—Matthew 5:23-24

2. The Lord's Supper is about 3 things: Looking back, around, and forward.