

Matthew 18:15-20 Conflict Resolution God's Way

The passage from Matthew 18:15-20 was intended to give the early church guidance about how to deal with conflict and broken relationships. The first step toward reconciliation involves listening. Sometimes what we hear is not actually what was said. A good example is gossip. Several different stories or rumours often result from one story or incident. True listening means going to the other person. In other words, we are to take the first step. This is often painful, but it is necessary if there is to be any hope of reconciliation, forgiveness and peace. If a relationship is important to us, sooner or later we will need to swallow our pride.

Reconciliation is the key to healing rifts and conflicts. Is it possible? Yes. Icy conditions don't provide for new growth-spiritual and otherwise. In the words of a Jesuit martyr, "The natural world is for everyone, without borders. God's table is a common table, big enough for everyone, each with a seat, so that each one can come to the table to eat". The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross changes our concept of the role of violence in God's protection of us; that is, violence is not a tool of our protection but rather our protection absorbs and transcends violence.

The process of reconciliation is made easier by the knowledge that God is with us if we come together in his name during the process. God is with us whenever two or three are gathered together in his name. God sustains us even when there is no hope. When we turn to the deepest centre of our hearts, we will find God and hope will spring forth. Reconciliation without God is not true reconciliation. It is merely peacemaking. When a believing community works to settle disputes, Christ is in our midst working to achieve the same goal. He is the ultimate

peacekeeper and peacemaker. He is the role model for peacekeeping forces in trouble spots worldwide. Just like Christ laid down his life to reconcile us to God, peacekeepers are prepared to lay down their lives to bring peace and reconciliation to warring parties.

Matthew's purpose was to make everything in the early church perfect. After all, he was a tax collector, and we all know how modern-day tax collectors like to have everything perfect and in order, especially when they want our hard-earned tax ! Matthew and Jesus wanted to restore order among believers. That's why Matthew included these words from Jesus in his gospel. That does NOT mean that they went to the extremes the Pharisees did by making up rules to cover every potential situation. On the contrary, Jesus liked to keep things simple. That's why he replaced the Ten Commandments with the two Great Commandments-"Love God and love people". Reconciliation is easier to do if we keep these two Great Commandments in mind.

Jesus isn't interested in who is right or who is wrong. He only cares about getting a broken relationship fixed. Our concerns about who is right and who is wrong often lead to giving up on relationships with others. Our natural response is to wage war with the other person, but that's not part of the blueprint God has for our lives-and that blueprint is the Bible. God's blueprint for our lives includes having conflicting parties sit down face to face and reconcile. The process of reconciliation is helped by prayer. When we are involved in conflict, we need to seek direction in prayer. If an outcome or resolution is reached through prayer, it will be accepted by God. Living a Christian life within a community of faith is not easy and demands some maturity from us. We have to determine how to love one

another. It is more than being nice. Real love in our world requires informed thought and tough choices.

Matthew 18:15-20 is not meant to be taken as permission for those in authority to harm others or abuse their power. It is about listening, accountability and a larger vision of God's kingdom. It is about being accountable to others for the power we hold. It is about using the power of God's kingdom to care for the least and most vulnerable.

As I mentioned earlier, the process of reconciliation is helped by prayer. For example, Corrie ten Boom worked to save Jews from the Nazis in Holland during World War II. She was arrested and taken to the infamous Ravensbruck concentration camp. She later wrote of her experiences in the famous book, "The Hiding Place". She often thought back over the horrors of the Ravensbruck concentration camp. How could she ever forgive the former Nazis who had been her jailers? Where were love, acceptance, and forgiveness in a horror camp where more than 95,000 women died? How could she ever forget the horrible cruelty of the guards and the smoke constantly coming from the chimney of the crematorium?

Then in 1947 Corrie was speaking in a church in Munich, and when the meeting was over she saw one of the cruelest male guards of Ravensbruck coming forward to speak to her. He had his hand outstretched. "I have become a Christian," he explained. "I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein, will you forgive me?"

A conflict raged in Corrie's heart. The Spirit of God urged her to forgive. The spirit of bitterness and coldness urged her to

turn away. "Jesus, help me," she prayed. Then she knew what she must do. "I can lift my hand," she thought to herself. "I can do that much."

As their hands met it was as if warmth and healing broke forth with tears and joy. "I forgive you, brother, with all my heart," she said. Later Corrie testified that "it was the power of the Holy Spirit" who had poured the love of God into her heart that day. This is the only way true forgiveness can take place. We turn our hurt over to God. We ask God for the ability to forgive.

The Holy Spirit lives in each and every one of us, but Jesus promises to be with us in a unique and special way when we gather in His name for worship, service and mutual encouragement. He is in our midst when we work together to right wrongs. Forgiveness and justice should characterize the Christian community. If it does, others will recognize something unique about the church and might even recognize Christ alive and active in our midst doing what isn't "do-able" without him.

Love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair. So let us be loving and optimistic, and we'll change the world". If we remember this and the words of Jesus, especially when we are in conflict with our fellow people, we will change the world. Loving our neighbour fulfills any and every other divine command, for genuine love does no harm to its neighbour.

In Jesus name, Amen.