

**“A Roadmap to Reconciliation and a Bit of Grace”**

**Matthew 18:15–20**

**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**

**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**

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In the second setting I served in, I preached three times a week for a while. The pastor with whom I worked retired, and we had an interim pastor who preached on Sunday mornings when he was in town, which wasn't often. So, I preached on Sunday mornings when he was gone, I preached on Sunday nights, since they had a Sunday night service, and I preached on Wednesday nights. The obvious question is, “How do you preach three sermons a week?” The answer is, “Not very well!”

I convinced them to shift Wednesday night programming to an educational model, but I could never convince them to re-think the Sunday night service, no matter how small the gathering was. Those of you who have been in church as long as I have know the rationale that was given. What was it we all heard? “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” It didn't matter how few people came, Jesus was there, so we needed to be there! Or at least some pious souls did. Some people who argued for the services never came to them.

I doubt many of these dear saints could have located the text they were quoting. I know they were unaware of its context. Scripture verses do not appear out of thin air, and often their context shapes their meaning. In this case, the context is the brief passage we have read from Matthew 18. It is not an admonition to worship often. It is a process for resolving conflict. Jesus provides a roadmap to reconciliation, and then says he will be present with us as we resolve our differences.

It is not something we like to talk about, but it is critical that we do. It is noble and right to seek peace and unity, but human beings, even those with the best intentions and deepest faith, have conflicts. How we resolve them shapes the nature of our community. The healthiest marriages are not the ones where couples never seem to have a single disagreement. The healthiest marriages are the ones where couples learn

to argue well. In like manner, the healthiest churches are the ones where differences are acknowledged and conflict is engaged and resolved.

Denying that conflict exists does not make it go away and attacking one another doesn't seem right in the Body of Christ. We need an alternative to the "fight or flight" dilemma which is what Jesus provides in Matthew 18. It's part of a chapter that addresses practical issues churches face. Matthew shapes Jesus' teachings for this purpose. And this issue, conflict, is one the early church experiences right away.

We see this in the tension over grace and law described in Galatians. We see it in the question of whether to include Gentiles throughout the book of Acts. And we see it in early extracanonical sources like the Didache and Ignatius' Letter to the Ephesians. Human conflict begins in the first family when one son kills the other. Church conflict begins with the first disciples who argue about who is greatest among them, who will sit next to Jesus in glory. Conflict is inevitable.

So, how does Jesus suggest we resolve it? We begin by going to the person who has offended us. We might say — the person we **think** has done something to offend us. Sometimes we misunderstand what someone says or does. Often, we assume a motive which puts the person on the defensive. But go to them directly, Jesus says, no one else needs to be involved at this point, and go without hostility, trying to sort it out. If you can, you will restore that relationship.

It sounds obvious, but is it what we do? Many times, someone will come to us, telling us how angry they are with someone else. "Can you believe what she did?!" they will say. There is an obvious first question. "Have you talked to her?" If the answer is, "No," our reply should be, "Then, why are you talking to **me**?" Jesus tells us resolve conflict directly. We need to encourage one other to do that because it is hard.

Jesus is not a licensed counselor, but he is offering sound advice. Often a kind but direct conversation leads to a quick resolution, which is better than allowing feelings to fester. Sometimes there has been a misunderstanding. Other times people just don't realize the impact of their behavior. Even when something hurtful has been knowingly said or done, a willingness to take ownership and change can lead to healing.

I remember a youth retreat in another setting where one youth was bullied by three others. Ironically, the focus of the retreat, chosen by the youth, was on community. After coming home, with encouragement, the wounded youth confronted the others. Two of the three made light of what happened, but the third broke down in tears, saying how bad she felt, especially since she had been the victim of bullying at school. That relationship was restored. It can and does happen.

But when it does not, when the wounding party refuses to take responsibility, Jesus says we should take one or two others along with us and talk to the person again. This may feel heavy-handed. If the other person won't listen, what can we do but move on? Sometimes the presence of other people, all seeking reconciliation, perhaps offering perspective, can enable a person to change. Other times something more just needs to be done for the wellbeing of all involved.

In one church I served, one member caused difficulty for others. As just one example of many, he took down publicity for church events others put up with the appropriate permission. I talked to him directly, asking him to please stop. He told me he liked to think of the church as his home, whereupon I pointed out it was not, but he refused to stop. So, several deacons had a conversation with him and finally he stopped.

Soon thereafter we discovered a trail of tears over twenty years long with people he had irritated in similar ways. What we did may seem harsh, but his behavior was harsh. Until being confronted by more than one person, the problem persisted and community life was affected.

Of course, Jesus' counsel does not stop here. He goes on to say that if the person won't listen to multiple people, they should be treated as a Gentile and a tax collector. It is a recommendation to distance someone who insists on harming others, not harm them, not kick them out, just distance them. We might think of the old practice of "churching" people, but this isn't that. After all, how does Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? It's simply distancing a person for a time.

I only know of one instance in which this happened in a church I served, long before I was there. A woman came forward at the end of

the service, to re-dedicate her life, the preacher thought, but she came back several weeks in a row. He asked why she was doing this, and she said it was because she loved him. He pointed out that he was happily married with two children, but she said that didn't matter. They were meant to be together. She kept coming forward. So, some deacons talked to her, but she kept coming forward, and finally they asked her to stop coming to church. It felt horrible, but something had to be done.

Years later, as fate or providence would have it, I visited the woman in the hospital. She said that if I knew much about her life, I wouldn't want to pray for her. Feigning ignorance, I assured her of God's love and prayed with her. She had been distanced years before but with the hope of being reconciled one day. This was the day.

Human relationships are messy, there are no guarantees, even if we use Jesus' roadmap to reconciliation. But perhaps, when all seems lost, we should return to the place where we began — with the assurance that Christ is present with us. When two or three are gathered in my name, Jesus says, even in conflict... This implies a sense of Divine affirmation on resolving conflict, but it also points to the possibility of divine help.

In the church, we are more than a human community, we are a spiritual entity known as the Body of Christ, and as the Apostle Paul says the church at Corinth, no one part of the body can say to another, "I have no need of you (1 Corinthians 12)." We have a responsibility to remain whole, to stay together, but with this responsibility comes a blessing — the head of the body, Christ, is with us, helping us work out our differences. We do not have to do it alone.

Are there not times when irreparable differences are repaired? Have we not seen people who would never let go of their anger reconcile? I performed a marriage for a couple who had been married to each other for ten years, then divorced for twenty years, only to remarry each other. How do these things happen? Not by human effort alone.

Jesus gives us a roadmap to reconciliation, but he also gives us a bit of grace, a strength not our own, his presence in our struggle. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Because he is, we can find a way to pursue healing.