

Confronting Brokenness

Psalm 133 begins:

*“How good and pleasant it is
when God’s people live together in unity!”*

It could just as easily read:

*“How difficult and frustrating it is
For God’s people to live together in unity!”*

Considering how central living in unity is to our faith and witness, we spend a dismaying amount of time not doing that.

This isn’t particularly a Christian problem, it is a people problem, something we are always looking to overcome.

It is not surprising then, that Matthew 18 receives so much attention. Finally, a step by step how-to guide on resolving conflict from the mouth of Jesus.

What to do when another member of the church sins against you. Sin is a big fought-over word with a lot of baggage. I’m using a definition of sin as *“any self-serving behavior that breaks the unity of the fellowship of Christ.”*

We will get to what this passage is for, but I would actually like to start by identifying what this passage is *not* for.

This passage is not just for *any* sin or conflict with *any* person.

This passage has too often been used out of context to force the illusion of unity at the expense of those who have been harmed.

We so desire a sure thing. A one-size-fits-all solution.
And sometimes we are willing to turn our backs on the complexity of life for a clean-cut solution.

The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes rails against the simplistic answers of traditional wisdom. Traditional wisdom often implies that one can learn from nature and human experience how to behave in *every* situation.

*“Trouble pursues the sinner,
but the righteous are rewarded with good things.”*

*“Whoever scorns instruction will pay for it,
but whoever respects a command is rewarded.”*

Traditional wisdom from the book of Proverbs.

The writer of Ecclesiastes is the rebel, the skeptic, pushing back against this, noting that in this broken upside-down life, The general truth is frequently contradicted by the reality of a particular situation.

Ecc 9:11 -- *I have seen something else under the sun:*

*The race is not to the swift
or the battle to the strong,
nor does food come to the wise
or wealth to the brilliant
or favor to the learned;
but time and chance happen to them all.*

That's kind of depressing, and not the main focus of this sermon, but I bring it up to remind us that Matthew 18's instructions on conflict resolution represents an ideal, in an imperfect world full of exceptions. Therefore being faithful to this passage means we need to identify what those exceptions might be before broadly prescribing the general truth of the passage.

First, this process is specifically for when we have been personally sinned against in the context of an actual relationship with an individual, somebody you are in community with, such as someone at your church or in your friend circle.

You don't have the same accountability to the person who bags your groceries as you do with someone in your extended family or someone you interact with in church every week.

It is important not to leave things unresolved with the person who bags your groceries, but it might not necessarily follow the steps of Matthew 18 to the letter.

Second, as Tim Nafziger points out:

Jesus was making it clear that dialogue takes place in a context of equity and justice. Equity and balance between parties in conflict is a prerequisite for conciliation and resolution of conflict...“We need to do a power analysis. We have to look at how social power is distributed in our communities and society”

Before we engage one on one, or two on one, or wherever we are in this process, we must ask, what are the power dynamics and how can we acknowledge those imbalances and negate them whenever possible.

You don't have to hold a gun or political office to affect the power dynamics in a room. Your occupation, age, gender, nationality, education, body type, economic status all play into privilege and power dynamics.

We bring them with us wherever we go, whether we mean to or not, whether we are aware of them or not, and they profoundly affect our conflicts and reconciliation of those conflicts.

Faithfully adhering to Matthew 18 means doing the work of discerning power dynamics.

Finally, Matthew 18 is not rules of engagement for combat. At its core of this passage is the desire for reconciliation, not for winning a court case.

This passage is not intended to be used as a club to "win" arguments

Exceptions and caveats identified, what and who is this passage *for*? How is this particular way of handling conflict a Christ-centered process that can bring healing to us and demonstrate God's healing power to the world around us?

To begin with, it is self-emptying.

First go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

It seems so obvious, but how hard is it, when we feel wronged, to confront that person in a spirit of vulnerability and say "I don't know if you are aware of this or not, but what you said the other day really hurt my feelings."

How much easier to go to someone else and say “Can you believe what so-and-so said? What a jerk right?”

I would much rather go the second route and have my perspective affirmed by a third party. Now there are two of us and one of them.

That might make me feel better but it does not take a step towards healing.

In the words of Jin Kim,

“We first honor the other person by speaking the truth in love, pouring our whole selves into the process for the sake of our relationship and the community as a whole. It is only if we have exhausted ourselves and are unable to break through that we bring the conflict to others in the church, which is available as a communal resource of discernment and guidance.”

“...the text urges us to confront brokenness rather than deny or run from it, to make a face-to-face attempt to resolve differences with the other party, and to seek mediation when a conflict cannot be resolved simply and directly”

The second characteristic of Christ-centered resolution: it is community oriented.

Forgiveness as a process involving the whole community of faith is radical and counter-cultural within a culture that lifts up independence and personal autonomy as the highest good.

We are so culturally ingrained to think this way that our churches struggle to model this too.

Kim frames the dilemma:

“What sense does a passage on church discipline make in a culture where church is often a place of self-sufficient individuals who gather for worship on Sunday, then leave to do their own thing throughout the week?”

What does it mean for the church to model “mutual interdependence” instead of “independence?” To not be free from each other, but rather be free *in* each other?

Maybe conflict resolution is a good place to start practicing that.

“But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

It's amazing what we are willing to do to avoid doing this. Yet taking conflict seriously is taking healing seriously.

Finally, Christ-centered resolution is persistent.

“If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Interpretation of this phrase can take us in vastly different directions. Early Anabaptists shaped their understanding of banning around passages such as this by taking it very literally.

Tough love.

If the church member is confronted and will not repent or change their way, they are to be separated from the community until they are willing to see the error of their way.

Mennonites have turned away from this radical perspective over the years, for a variety of reasons.

Truly considering *how* Jesus interacted with Gentiles and tax collectors seems, in my opinion, to be a far cry from banning anyway.

A passage that is bookended by a story about leaving the 99 to save the one and forgiving not seven times but seventy seven times, would seem to indicate that persistence in love is the Christ-centered ethic we are to glean from this passage.

Conflict resolution:
Confronting our brokenness
Self-emptying
Intentional
Vulnerable
Community oriented
Persistent

Always binding when the general truth of this passage holds. Always loosing when the particular situation is not applicable, whether because of the nature of the offense or on account of power dynamics.

Always seeking creative and specific ways to wrestle with the exceptions.

Let us lean into the difficult and fraught work of conflict management, being the city on a hill that witnesses to a divided world, but always starting at home, with our sisters and brothers we walk alongside in faith.