

When Things Go Wrong Matthew 18:15-20

Matthew chapter 18 begins with the disciple asking Jesus about who is great in the Kingdom of God and Jesus used this as an occasion to teach about honesty and humility. I know, we are in the church and everyone is doing their best to do right, but in this world stuff happens and things go wrong. There are times when, deliberately or unconsciously, we offend others and hurt them, or we are the one offended and hurt. Even the Old Testament Law recognized “sins of ignorance” (Num. 15:22), and David prayed to be delivered from “secret faults” (Ps. 19:12), meaning those “faults that are even hidden from my own eyes.” So, what should we do when another Christian has sinned against us or caused us to stumble?

What we know from the gospel writings is Jesus’ teaching instruct us, “If anyone sins against you, spare no effort to make that person admit their fault, and to get things right again between you and them.” Basically it means that we should never tolerate any situation in which there is a break down of personal relationships between us and another member of the Christian community.

But suppose something does go wrong, what are we to do to put it right? Jesus gave several basis rules to follow in our scripture.

First, if we feel that someone has wronged us, we should immediately put our complaint into words. The worst thing that we can do about a wrong is to brood about it. That is fatal. It can poison the whole mind and life, until we can think of nothing else but our sense of personal injury. Any such feeling should be brought out into the open, faced, and stated, and often the very stating of it will show how unimportant and trivial the whole thing is.

Second Jesus instructs us to keep the matter private. If we feel that someone has wronged us, we should go to see them personally. More trouble has been

caused by the writing of letters or emails than by almost anything else. A letter or email may be misread and misunderstood; it may quite unconsciously convey a tone it was never meant to convey. If we have a difference with someone, there is only one way to settle it—and that is face to face. The spoken word can often settle a difference which the written word would only have exacerbated. We are to approach the person who sinned and speak with them alone. It is possible that they didn't even realize what they have done. Or, even if they did it deliberately, you must have an attitude of submission and love to help them to repent and apologize. Above all, go to them with the idea of winning your brother or sister, not with the idea of winning an argument. You know it is possible to win the argument and lose your brother or sister.

We must have a spirit of meekness and gentleness when we try to restore a brother or sister (Gal. 6:1). We must not go about condemning the offender, or spreading gossip. We must lovingly try to help them in the same way we would want them to help us if the situation were reversed. The word used here is a Greek medical word that means “to set a broken bone.” Think how wonderful life will be when the situation is resolved and fellowship is restored. But this requires patience and tenderness and open communication!

Third, ask for help from others. If the offender refuses to make things right, then we may feel free to share the burden with one or two wise and dependable Christians. We should share the facts as we see them and ask these persons for their prayerful counsel. After all, it may be that we are the one in the wrong. If the others feel the cause is right, then together we can go to the offender and try again to win them. Not only can these persons assist in prayer and persuasion, but they can be witnesses to the church of the truth of the conversation (Deut. 19:15; 2 Cor. 13:1). In this case the taking of the witnesses is meant to help the process of reconciliation. A person may have difficulty talking to the one they injured; and it

may be that nothing we can say can win them back. But to talk matters over with some wise and kindly and gracious people present may create a new atmosphere in which there is at least a chance that we should see ourselves “as others see us.”

Fourth, ask the church for help. Remember, our goal is not the winning of a case but the winning of a brother or sister. We must take our personal troubles to the Christian fellowship. Why? Because troubles are never settled by going to law, or by Christless argument. It is in an atmosphere of Christian prayer, Christian love and Christian fellowship that personal relationships may be corrected. The clear assumption is that the Church fellowship *is* Christian, and seeks to judge everything, not in the light of a book of practice and procedure, but in the light of love. The word regain in our scripture refers to winning the lost; but it is also important to win the saved. Remember this person is a member of the church. What had started as a private problem between two people is now out in the open for the whole church to see. If by the time the matter comes to the whole church, the offender has not changed their mind and behavior, then they must be disciplined.

What Jesus said we are to do next is one of the most difficult and misunderstood passages of scripture. Matthew said the stubborn person is no longer to be treated as a spiritual brother or sister. And it seems that the person has forfeited their position as member of the church. They can only be treated as one outside the church, not hated, but not held in close fellowship. But does that sound like something Jesus would teach or how we are to behave?

The passage says let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. How did Jesus treat tax-collectors and Gentiles? Does Jesus teach us to limit forgiveness to three attempts at resolving the problem; then we get to write off our brother or sister? Did Jesus teach there comes a time when a person may be abandoned as beyond hope?

When Jesus spoke of tax-gatherers and sinners he always did so with sympathy and gentleness and an appreciation of their good qualities. Remember that Jesus was accused of being the friend of tax-collectors and sinners; and he never spoke of them as hopeless outsiders, but always with sympathy and love, and even with praise (cp. Matthew 9:10ff; 11:19; Luke 18:10ff). It may be that what Jesus said was something like this: “When you have done all this, when you have given the sinner every chance, and when they remains stubborn, you may think that he is no better than a renegade tax-collector, or even a godless Gentile. Well, you may be right. But I have not found the tax-collectors and the Gentiles hopeless. My experience of them is that they, too, have a heart to be touched; and there are many of them, like Matthew and Zacchaeus, who have become my best friends. Even if the stubborn sinner is like a tax-collector or a Gentile, you may still win them, as I have done.”

Our passage is not an injunction to abandon a person; it is a challenge to win them with the love which can touch even the hardest heart. It is not a statement that some persons are hopeless; it is a statement that Jesus Christ has found no person hopeless—and neither must we. On yesterday I had the occasion to discuss the situation of a teenager from my former congregation who has issues of mistrust. Here aunt concluded that what this girl needs from the church is not criticism, but love and encouragement. We need to let her know that we have not given up on her.

So did Jesus give the Church the power to retain and to forgive sins? I believe Jesus was teaching us to keep the local church spiritual. It is important that the local assembly be at its best spiritually before it seeks to discipline a member. When a church disciplines a member, it is actually examining itself and disciplining itself. This is why Jesus added words about authority, prayer, and fellowship. We cannot discipline others if we ourselves are not disciplined.

Whatever we loose (permit) in the assembly must first have been permitted by God.

The church must be under the authority of God's Word. Church discipline does not refer to a group of Christian policemen throwing their weight around. No, it means God exercising authority in and through a local body, to restore one of God's erring children.

Not only must there be the authority of the Word, but there must also be prayer (Matt. 18:19). The church must agree in prayer as it seeks to discipline the erring member. It is through prayer and the Word that we understand the will of God in the matter.

Finally, there must be fellowship (Matt. 18:20). The local church must be a worshiping community, recognizing the presence of the Lord in their midst. The Holy Spirit of God can convict both the offender and the church, and the Spirit can even judge sin in the midst (Acts 5).

There is a desperate need for honesty in the church today. "Speaking the truth in love" is God's standard (Eph. 4:15). If we practice love without truth, it is hypocrisy. But if we try to have truth without love, it may be brutality. Jesus always taught the truth in love. If the truth hurts, it is because "Faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Prov. 27:6).

But keep in mind that humility must come before honesty. A proud Christian cannot speak the truth in love. They will use a brother or sister's faults as a weapon to fight with and not as a tool to build the other up. The result will be only greater disharmony and disagreement.^{1 2}

¹Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Mt 18:15

²Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:62

I found an article in The Disciple magazine October 1999 issue. Lester McAllister, a disciples historian, repeated a story he heard about James Beauchamp “Champ” Clark, and the congregation of which he was a member a few miles from Columbia, Missouri.

It seems that Clark, who had become Speaker of the House of Representatives, had taken up “drinking and politicking” in Washington, D.C.

“While he seldom drank alcohol to excess, his reputation bothered some of his home congregation. The elders of the congregation advised him to clean up his behavior, which he apparently agreed to do. But on returning to Washington, D.C., Clark “backslid.”

The next time the Clark family attended worship, an elder stood up and advised the congregation that Clark was being “churched” – excommunicated from the fellowship.

Expecting Clark and his family to leave, the elders were surprised when the politician stayed put through the entire service. When the call to discipleship was made at the end of the service McAllister said, “Champ Clark stepped forward and presented himself for admission to the church.”

You can’t do that to a Disciple,” McAllister said of excommunication. “Champ Clark knew we come at God’s invitation and only God can kick us out.”

When things go wrong, as they often do, we are to work toward mending broken relationship by being prayerful and relying on the power and the authority of Jesus. Jesus has promised to be with us, whether we are two or three or a massive congregation.³ We must do our part and pray for God’s will to be done in our lives. Amen.

³ Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of Matthew : Volume 2*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible, Rev. Ed), S. 186