

Matthew 18:15-20 N.T. 19 (NRSV)

¹⁵“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Matthew 18:15-20 N.T. Page 19
“Righting Wrongs”

Opening Prayer: Please bow with me in prayer. Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord, God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come. Draw us into your presence today. Show us the ways of your kingdom so that we may do here on earth just as is done among your people in your heavenly kingdom. In Jesus’ Name we pray, **Amen.**

Introduction: “*Where two or three are gathered.*” That’s the beginning of what’s most likely the best known verse in our Bible lesson today from Matthew 18. When I say, “Where two or three are gathered...,” I expect many of you can complete that verse from memory. That’s just how well known that verse is. But for just a moment **let’s forget** that those two or three are gathered in Christ’s name, and let’s just think about what happens when you get two or three people together. **On one hand**, these two or three people can keep each other company. They can help each other pass the time. **They can sing** a duet or a trio in perfect harmony. There can be goodness in their gathering.

But human nature being human nature there’s always another side to what happens when you get two or three people together. **Sooner or later** there’s gonna be a disagreement about something. There will be two or three differing opinions. There will be arguments and maybe even a fight. **So where** two or three are gathered, **even in Christ’s name**, sooner or later conflict is gonna arise **and someone is gonna get hurt**. Happiness and harmony give way to tension and discord. **Jesus knew that**. Jesus understands human nature. **That’s why Jesus provides** the wise counsel that Matthew recorded for us here in today’s Bible lesson. **There are times** when someone, even someone within our close circle of friends, is going to hurt us. And Jesus wants us to know how to right the wrong **to restore happiness and harmony** where two or three are gathered.

PAUSE

Move I.

It takes initiative to make things right. And Jesus says that initiative needs to start with you. **When you've been hurt**, you're not to sit around and sulk, and lick your wounds. **You're not to gripe and complain** to your family, your friends, your neighbors, and even to complete strangers. **You're not to post a Facebook status** bitterly complaining about how some nameless nemesis has wronged you, but we see examples of that most every day. Someone is indignant about how someone has mistreated them and the first thing they do is go and vent in public by posting it on Facebook. And of course, this never resolves anything, it just brings more people jumping on the post chiming in with their own complaints. After all, someone has wronged you, so surely you're entitled to a public display of your righteous indignation over your mistreatment. There's nothing stopping you from doing that, **but that's not** the kind of initiative Jesus is talking about.

When you've been hurt, Jesus says, **“Go and point out the fault”** (Matthew 18:15, NRSV). The first word in Jesus' instructions is an action word, **“go.” Go where?** Not home to sulk. No, **go to the person** who has hurt you. Go to the source of your hurt. **And when are you to go?** There's no way you can read Jesus' simple command as doing anything other than **going now**. Don't wait a few days for the dust to settle. Don't go off and stew on the situation. Go now and take the initiative to make the right the wrong. Grammatically the word **“Go!!!” is an imperative**. This is not an optional first step, it is a completely necessary first step. Jesus isn't promising that this first step will be successful, but **you need to be the one to take the initiative**.

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Now, I will readily admit, this isn't very easy. If you're a person with a volatile disposition, **you might well want** to take the initiative to go and punch the other guy in the face. And on some level this does seem justified. **After all**, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is a Biblical prescription, isn't it? **But Jesus is far more** interested in reconciliation and peace than he is in vengeance and retribution. What Jesus is saying in essence is to go and **extend your hand** toward the one who hurt you, offering peace. That's the first step, and you need to be the one to take it.

It should come as no surprise you that people who specialize in conflict resolution, particularly within churches, look to Jesus' instructions here in here in **Matthew 18:15-17** for guidance. **David Garrett** is an attorney in Michigan who has a consulting business that mediates conflicts in faith-based groups including churches. Mr. Garrett uses a comical video to clearly illustrate the conflict resolution process Jesus teaches. Let's watch the part of the video that get us through the first step:

{Play video "*Conflict Resolution Step 1.wmv*" [1:41]}

In the video it's clear that the fellow sitting at the table slurping his drink was wronged. **He has no idea** why the other guy knocked the dominoes over on him, but he did see him running from the scene. **He could have acted in anger**, but he didn't. **Instead he went and confronted** the other fellow with what happened. At this point what happens next is up to the other guy. The video shows both possible outcomes. **Either there's an apology** and peace, **or there's continued conflict** and hostility. **Jesus doesn't promise** how it's gonna turn out. **But Jesus does want** you to take the initiative when you've been sinned against. **Yes, it really does take initiative to make things right.**

End I.

Move II.

But it always takes two to reconcile. You can extend your hand in peace, but the other person has to take it. I know that, you know that, and Jesus knows that too. **It takes** two to tangle. **It takes** two sing a duet. **It takes** two to reconcile.

Before I go much further, I think I need to make the context of Jesus' instructions for righting wrongs very clear. Jesus is not addressing all of society, be it local, national, or global. Rather, Jesus is addressing people who are his followers be they in Jerusalem, Judea, or the ends of the earth. **These are the people** who are your brothers and sisters in the faith. So, Jesus is specifically addressing **people who are having conflicts** within the church. **Eugene Peterson** makes this context very clear in the way he chooses to translate **Matthew 18:15a (MSG)**, **"If a fellow believer hurts you."** That fellow believer is your brother or sister in Christ, be they someone who's worshipping with you here this morning, or a believer who is your neighbor or coworker who is part of another congregation here in town or anywhere else around the world. **The translators of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible**, make the same distinction. They say, **"If another member of the church sins against you..."** (Matthew 18:15a, NRSV). **Now it's not that** Jesus's advice won't worked with people of other faiths, **or even people of no faith**. **It's just that** it has a much better chance when you're related through your relationship with Jesus. **This is a Christian to Christian** methodology for righting wrongs.

I can't tell you how many times someone will say something about someone and say, **"They're a good Christian person."** I have to admit I cringe a little inside whenever I hear a descriptive adjective attached to the word Christian. "Good" Christian, **"bad"** Christian, **"on-fire"** Christian, **"backslidden"** Christian, **"conservative"** Christian, **"progressive"** Christian, etc., etc. When we do things like that we're passing a judgment that's not ours to make.

We are all sinners saved by grace, **and only God** can change our hearts. A person is either a follower of Jesus or they aren't. **There's no such thing** as being a "little bit" Christian. Either you are or you aren't. **And if you are**, you've made Jesus the Master of your life. **And when two believers** are in conflict, **there is always hope** they will both be true to their calling and allow Jesus to take control of the situation.

When I talk with people I frequently say, **you can't live someone else's** life for them. You can't control how they will react and what they will do. **All you can do** is love them and pray for the best for them. **Yet, there will be times** when a fellow believer hurts you, **and they will turn** away from your offer of reconciliation. When that happens, it hurts all the more.

You can then continue down steps two and three of Jesus' process for righting wrongs. **You can approach the person** with one or two others with you as witnesses. **This is keeping of the Old Testament** that says "a matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Deuteronomy 19:15). **But once again, that might not work**, so you can go to the third step **and take the person before the church**, and **that might not work either**. Yet, at any point in the process the person who has wronged you may have a change of heart. **And when they do** there can be reconciliation. You still need to be the one to take the initiative. **But it always does take two to reconcile.**

End II.

Move III.

And sometimes we need to leave things in God's hands. We can only do so much ourselves in trying to right a wrong. We can do our part, but we can't do the other person's part too. **This is the same point** that the Apostle Paul made in last week's Bible lesson from Romans 12:9-21. Remember, I called that Paul's "*List for Life*," which was "*18 Things for Living a Better Life*." **Number 14** on Paul's list is "**If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peacefully with all**" (Romans 12:18, NRSV). Or as Eugene Peterson words it: "**If you've got it in you, get along with everybody**" (Romans 12:18, MSG). You can do your part, but you can't do the other person's part too. Once you've exhausted Jesus' three steps, if the other person still won't listen, you need to leave it all in God's hands.

The exact way Jesus words what you do when you've exhausted all three steps is like this, "**and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector**" (Matthew 15:17b, NRSV). **But how exactly** do you treat a pagan and a tax collector? Do you do everything in your power to make life difficult for them? That's what a lot of people would do. **They figure if they won't kiss and make up**, there's gonna be hell to pay. But I'm pretty sure you all know that's not what Jesus is saying. **Vengeance is never ours** to extract, God will take care of that when the time is right. **Again, number 15** from Paul's list from last week says, "**Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. 'I'll do the judging,' says God. 'I'll take care of it'**" (Romans 12:19, MSG). **In other words**, leave it in God's hands.

There are also others, including some people in churches I have been part of over the years, who figure treating someone like "a pagan and a tax collector" is to completely ignore them. **You know**, kind of like an Amish shunning. You pretend like that person doesn't exist. But that's not what Jesus means either.

Did Jesus ever tell Christians to ignore pagans? Did Jesus ever tell people to ignore tax collectors? **For just a moment**, I want you to remember who it is whose recording Jesus' words in our Bible lesson today. Who is it? (Wait for answer.) **It's Matthew!** And what was Matthew's profession when he first met Jesus? **Matthew was a publican—a tax collector.** And how did Jesus treat Matthew? **As a person who needed salvation.** So, how should you treat the person who hurt you and still won't listen?

Once again, I think Eugene Peterson manages to capture what Jesus means when he used that first century Jewish metaphor. Eugene Peterson translates the “**treat them like a pagan or tax collector**” expression like this: “**If they won't listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch, confront them with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love**” (Matthew 18:17b, MSG). Rather than ignoring them, you stay engaged. **You count on God** to continue to work in their lives and change their heart. You remain open to the possibility that in due time God will bring restoration. It's not always possible for you to right every wrong. **So, sometimes you do need to leave things in God's hands.**

End III.

Conclusion: Where two or three are gathered, sooner or later conflict is gonna arise and someone is gonna get hurt. And Jesus wants us to know how to right the wrong to restore happiness and harmony. **Yet, it takes initiative to make things right.** When you've been hurt, don't sit around and sulk and lick your wounds. Take the initiative and "go and point out their fault." **But it always takes two to reconcile.** You can extend your hand in peace, but the other person has to take it. **So, sometimes you need to leave things in God's hands.** It's not always possible for you to "**Right every wrong.**" Once you've exhausted Jesus' three steps, if the other person still won't listen, you need to let the whole situation in God's hands. Remain open to the possibility that in due time God will bring restoration:

{**Play audio: "Restoration Clip.mp3" [0:11]**}

Closing Prayer: Let's pray. Oh God, give us the courage to take the initiative. Help us to confront those who have hurt us, so you can bring restoration to all of our souls. **Amen!**

10:30 Closing Hymn: "Help Us Accept Each Other" Red Hymnal No. 560

All Four Verses

Sending Forth: Has someone hurt you? Are you sulking and licking your wounds? Then you need to follow Jesus' instructions for "Righting Wrongs." Go forth, and take the initiative and let God bring restoration to your souls. **And all of God's people said...Amen!**