

## Training Session 22 - Practical Necessities: Handling Conflict

### Objective

Learn to seek peace through Christ-centered conflict resolution.

### Key Scripture

Matthew 18:15-17

### Introduction

Handling conflict as a follower of Jesus is a practical necessity because all of us, without exception, will experience conflict. The question is not if, but when. Last week, we focused on the hard work required to prepare your heart for the first reconciliation meeting. In doing this work, you'll be able to assess if that meeting is even necessary or if you can and should overlook the offense. The point of last week was to take your eyes off the person you are in conflict with and fix them on Christ. It's critical that you move into the conflict "rooted and established in (His) love" (Ephesians 3:17), with a joyful certainty that this conflict is ultimately about His glory. It's not about you winning. It's about Jesus winning.

Honestly, without the work of preparing your heart that we discussed last week, the odds of the meeting going well are slim to zero. A close friend put it this way: "Conflict is going to be hard. You're going to take some shots (metaphorically). If you are coming into the meeting standing on one tip toe, anything and anybody can knock you over, but if you are firmly planted on both feet with your knees bent and your weight under you, then you are ready for the blows that will inevitably come." In sum, last week was about centering yourself in Christ and helping you prepare your heart to humbly enter into the conflict, rooted and established in the love of Christ.

This week we're going to look at what the first Christ-centered reconciliation meeting looks like. Thankfully, Jesus gave us a process to follow when (not if) things go sideways, found in Matthew 18:15-17. We'll focus on this process in our training session today.

### **Matthew 18 Mindset: It's all about reconciliation and restoration.**

Matthew 18 is the central text Jesus gave us on conflict resolution, but before we get to the *text*, remember the context. When Jesus gave us these helpful, sequential steps on how to handle conflict in Matthew 18:15-17, He placed the steps in a larger message about reconciliation and restoration. Ponder this. The story immediately before the steps on reconciliation (in Matthew 18:12-14) is about a wandering sheep and how the Good Shepherd leaves 99 sheep to search far and wide in order to bring home the wandering one. After He gives the steps toward reconciliation in verses 15-17, He tells another story about an unmerciful servant and encourages us to forgive not just "seven times, but seventy times seven." Hmmm. Think on these things. Before you take the steps, remember what the steps are leading to: forgiveness and

reconciliation. In essence, get your mind and heart right first, then follow the steps of Matthew 18 second. So, what are the steps in Matthew 18?

**Step 1 (Matthew 18:15): Go gently to them in person (if at all possible)**

My mentor once told me, “Stephen, when you have conflict, it is very important to go step by step, word by word. Follow this process in Matthew 18, carefully.” So here’s the first step: “*If you brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over*” (Matthew 18:15). You go face-to-face, not behind their back, and it begins just between the two of you. Think about it. When Jesus said to “go and point out their fault,” there were no cell phones, no texts, and email wasn’t a thing. Without question, He had in mind a face-to-face, “Come to Jesus meeting.” Thus, in almost all cases, we should aim for an in-person meeting.

Yet in some extreme cases, it isn’t wise or practical to go alone or in person. For instance, in cases of abuse or extreme power differentials (e.g. a CEO and an employee at the bottom of the org chart), it would be wise to skip step one and include a wise, Christ-centered third party for the sake of either physical, emotional, or vocational safety. Moreover, in some cases the party may be geographically removed so that a face-to-face meeting is virtually impossible, with virtually being the key word. Thankfully, through Facetime and Skype, we can connect virtually and it’s almost like being in the same room together. As a last resort, emails, letters, and written correspondence can help you go to the person to keep the matter “just between the two of you.” The challenge here is that you miss body language, dialogue, tone, and nonverbal cues that can help a person “feel the love”--not to mention the fact that whatever you put in email or letter can be highlighted and remembered for many moons.

**5 Commitments for the First Reconciliation Meeting:**

As you go to the person you are in conflict with for the first reconciliation meeting, you need to make 5 firm commitments:

***Commitment #1: Go gently***

“If someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person **gently**” (Galatians 6:1). Gently, not with a baseball bat or a bazooka. Why does Paul use the word gently? The Greek word for “caught in a sin” (prolempthe) means trapped. Picture your friend walking through the woods and all of a sudden they step in a bear trap. They are writhing in pain. If they aren’t freed (gently), they will die. Yes, they have hurt you, but hurting people hurt people. They are hurting and they need you. Go gently to help set them free!

***Commitment #2: Go ASAP***

The timing is NEVER right. Holidays are coming. Work is crazy. A family member is sick. You name it. For example, I once challenged a friend to go to the person who hurt them and they said, “But now just isn’t a good time” and listed several of the typical reasons above. I listened and then said, “Yes, but Jesus seems to give priority to reconciliation over everything you mentioned. He even goes so far as to say that if you are in a church service worshipping and remember that someone ‘has something against you,’ leave the service immediately and go and be reconciled, then come back to the church service and resume worshipping” (See Matthew

5:23). Jesus seems to think reconciliation is *that* important. Don't go to church Sunday. Don't pass go. Don't collect \$200. Drop what you are doing. Go immediately. It's that important.

“Yes, but they should make the first move and come apologize. I didn't do anything.” It doesn't matter. Neither did the person Jesus mentions in Matthew 18:15. In Mt. 18:15, Jesus simply tells us that our brother or sister is in sin. He doesn't mention that we have done anything wrong. Yet, he still says, “Go and point out their fault, just between the two of you” (Mt. 18:15). Bottom line—unity, living at peace, and getting out of the ruts of sin are important enough for us to humble ourselves and take the first step towards reconciliation, even if we see ourselves as the offended party.

***Commitment #3: Go before talking to others***

Go to them first, not to others. Going to others entails gossip; going directly to the person you are in conflict with entails God getting glory (Proverbs 16:28; Ephesians 4:29).

***Commitment #4: Go & speak for yourself only (in Step 1 of Matthew 18:15)***

Resist the temptation in that first meeting, to “wake them up” and help them see how bad their sin really is by citing others who feel the same way. This is the opposite of going gently—it's going with bullying, manipulative force (Galatians 6:1). For instance, I once had someone say to me, “I have spoken to 19 other people who all feel the same way about you.” 19? I'm not kidding. Not 20, but 19. To be sure, I wasn't without fault, but here's why this wasn't the best way to help me see my faults. First, I felt ganged up on by a group of nameless bullies. I had no way to be reconciled to 19 nameless people who apparently thought I was either in sin or just a terrible leader. Second, when I met with the few who were named, they had a very different perspective than what was shared. Third, I was envisioning 19 backroom conversations happening *about* me, but not *with* me. You can imagine why that isn't helpful. So as you go, speak for yourself, not for others. They haven't given you permission to speak for them or to bring them into this conflict, but even if they did, you can't represent how they would represent themselves, so leave them out of it for now.

***Commitment #5: Go to listen***

In a culture filled with blogs, tweets, polarized politics, and increasing acidity, listening is a lost art. Yet, as followers of Jesus, we're called to “be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (James 1:19). Pulling this off is like pulling teeth without Novocaine: it hurts. When we're hurt, we want to respond in kind. It hurts not to let 'em have it when you've been deeply hurt.

Listening is paramount whether you are the accuser or being accused. If someone is coming to you accusing you of hurting them, then you will need to double down on listening and distance yourself as much as possible from our natural inclination toward **defensiveness**. Doing so is painfully difficult because we almost always feel misunderstood, misrepresented, and mystified by what is being shared.

“Are you saying that I can’t speak at all? What about all the factual inaccuracies being shared?” No. Paul defends himself on a number of occasions when he is confronted, and so does Jesus. Jesus, in fact, rips into the Pharisees when they come after him. Or James, in the verse quoted above, says be “slow to speak”--he doesn’t say “never speak!” Here is a general rule of thumb I try to follow. If it is factual, speak up; if it is relational, listen. For example, if someone is accusing you of something you simply didn’t do, then speak up. At the very least, you need to clarify with questions, “Can you help me understand what you are saying?” On the other hand, if someone is sharing with you ways you hurt them and patterns of behavior, the best thing you can do is listen and then ask clarifying questions.

### **Step 2 (Matthew 18:16): Go gently with a mature follower(s) of Christ**

No matter how well prepared you are for the initial meeting, sometimes it just doesn’t go well. They either didn’t listen or didn’t agree or got so defensive and angry that very little progress was made. Jesus envisioned recalcitrant hearts and provided a next step, “*But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses’*” (Matthew 18:16). Now is the time to add a bit more evidence to “establish” matters.

In this step, you will need at least one other mutually agreed upon party to join the meeting for reconciliation, possibly more. Third parties help regulate the emotional temperature in the room and can help create a less combative atmosphere. Moreover, third parties can help you realize areas where you are off as well.

The point of their presence is to “establish” the evidence. Yet, sometimes the other party won’t agree to having others present. What then? Ken Sande, of Peacemaker ministries, writes, “*While mutual agreement is always preferable, it is not actually required if your opponent professes to be a Christian. Matthew 18:16 indicates that you may seek help...even if your opponent doesn’t want it.*”<sup>1</sup>

But what if the person I am conflict with isn’t a Christian and doesn’t agree to any of these Biblical steps? These basic principles can be followed regardless of whether or not a person is following Christ. While you may not be able to appeal to the Bible and the conversation isn’t about sin, you can still use these same principles to establish matters of right and wrong and areas of hurt. If worse comes to worse, you may do what is often referred to as an intervention, which involves several people close to the person who is caught in the bear trap (i.e. addiction, harmful behavioral pattern, etc.) coming together to confront them.

Who should you involve in the conflict as a third party? First and foremost, you want to find people who are mature followers of Jesus who will approach this conflict with an eye toward redemption (1 Corinthians 6:5; Galatians 6:1). Some may have technical expertise that would be helpful, they may have been witnesses to some of the events in question, or they may have a longstanding personal relationship with the person in question, ideally both of you. When approaching the person(s), you want to give as few details as possible about the conflict to prevent biasing the third party in your favor. Simple statements such as, “I’m not seeing eye to eye with Jim on a particular issue. Can you help us?” Then, when both parties are present, you

can share the details of the conflict. The opposing party should know, up front, that this will be your approach and both of you will need to decide what level of authority each of you will give to the third party (e.g. facilitate conversation, advice, binding, etc).

### **Step 3 (Matthew 18:17): Go gently and tell it to the Church**

Sadly, sometimes they still won't listen to you or to the mediator(s), in which case Jesus offered a third step, "*If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church*" (Matthew 18:17). What does it mean to "tell it to the church" when parties don't attend the same local church and often times may not attend a local church at all or even be a Christian? It means stand up in church and grab the microphone and tell it like it is. Or not. Most definitely not. In the case of two Christians who attend two different churches, it could mean telling it to spiritual authorities (i.e. pastors, elders, community group leaders, etc.) to enlist their help.

In the case of someone who doesn't profess to follow Jesus, then this step is really no different than step 2 of involving a community of trusted individuals who can help gently restore the person who is writhing in pain in the bear trap.

### **Step 4 (Matthew 18:17): Treat them as a nonbeliever**

So far, nothing has worked. They won't listen or cooperate or turn from their sin. They're happy in the bear trap. What next? Jesus said, "*if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector*" (Matthew 18:17). To be clear, Jesus is not saying, "Tell them they are not a Christian and that hell is really hot." One thing He is really clear on is that none of us can judge another person's heart (James 4:12). Judgment is God's role, and God's role alone. We can't authoritatively say who is and who is not a Christian. What we can tell them, however, is that they are acting like a person who is not following Jesus because they are willfully resisting turning from sin. We might say something like, "Listen, I love you enough to tell you that you are not acting like a Christian. I'm not saying you aren't a Christian, but I am saying you aren't acting like one. Followers of Jesus turn from sin when they are confronted with it. I know it is hard, but you've got to turn from this. We'll help you."

Practically, what does it look like to treat someone as a nonbeliever? It means they will be treated as the object and focus of our love. Who did Jesus spend his time with? Pagans and tax collectors, so much so that the religious people asked his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Mark 2:16). Jesus gave priority to and showed love to pagans and tax collectors and He is calling us to love them as He loved them. He is calling us to love them in word and in deed and by joyfully proclaiming the good news of the gospel with the hope that they will turn from their sin and trust Christ.

### **I tried the steps. Nothing worked. What next?**

Sometimes, you can follow everything Jesus lays out, but nothing changes. What next? If the harm done is serious enough, then you may want to proceed through the options available in the legal system, all the way from Christian conciliation, to mediation, arbitration, with the last resort being a lawsuit. Sometimes, hard hearts remain hardened, which is why Romans 12:18 says, "if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Sometimes it just isn't possible, but as far as it depends on you, you have done absolutely everything within

your power to live at peace. Thankfully, you can sleep peacefully at night knowing that you have made “*every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*” (Ephesians 4:3).

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Based on the context of the entire chapter of Matthew 18, what is the mindset you should have heading into any conflict?
2. What is the first step of Matthew 18? Have you ever done this or had it done to you. How did it go?
3. As you prepare for the first reconciliation meeting (step 1), we discussed 5 commitments. Which do you think is most important? Which is most difficult to carry out?
4. Step 2 involves bringing other mature, followers of Jesus into the conflict. Describe the challenges and benefits of doing so.
5. What is step 3? Have you ever seen this play out? How do you think this could be beneficial or harmful?
6. What is step 4? Have you ever seen this play out? How do you think this could be beneficial or harmful?
7. Read Romans 12:18. In light of this verse, how do you approach a conflict that just won't go away?

### **Endnotes**

1. Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Ada, Michigan: Baker, 2008), 189.