

Staying Together – Matthew 18:15-20

Introduction: In one of Aesop's fables, there is the story of a lion and a boar who came at the same moment to small well to drink. An argument broke out over which of them should drink first, and soon, these two wild animals were engaged in mortal combat. When they stopped to catch their breath, they saw some vultures waiting in the distance to feast on the one that should fall first. They at once made up, saying, "*It is better for us to make friends, than become the food of vultures.*" The moral is: When Christians fight among themselves, the vultures of the world will eat us for lunch.

I'm glad I am not preaching this message out of a dire necessity. I'm thankful that as far as I know, we are not fighting amongst ourselves. As far as I know, we are in unity and at peace with each other. That is one reason we're seeing folks saved and baptized. God's purpose and work is being accomplished unhindered by the chains of disunity in His church.

Thank God we are united in our cause and purpose. We are united in our commitment to service. We are united in our compassion and concern for helping people in need and in our support of each other. And we are united in our confidence in God's ability to meet every challenge we face.

We know that God has not called us to be lone rangers...we need each other. This church has seen the devastation and hurt that can happen as a result of disunity, and we've also seen what can happen when we're united. We've seen miracles and mission work and many folks brought to Christ.

But we also know that we're involved in spiritual warfare. The devil doesn't like it when God's work is being accomplished and one of his favorite and most powerful weapons he brings against us is disunity in the ranks caused by disputes and misunderstandings and finger pointing.

So today we come to the middle of Matthew 18 in our study of Matthew where we find a lesson in resolving conflicts. **Let's read Matthew 18:15-18.**

In these verses, Jesus taught His disciples how to stay together in the heat of the battle. Think of it as a 4-step approach to maintaining unity

First, when unity has been threatened or has been broken between Christians brothers and sisters, we are to take:

1. An Individual Approach (15) *“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”*(NIV)

There are four aspects about this approach that this verse implies. First, we are to go to the offending person:

A. Personally. This is a matter between you and someone else. It’s personal. The first person who needs to know that you’re upset about something, that you’ve been offended, or hurt, or that you’re concerned about something is the person who did the offending. We need to go to that person personally. Second, we are to go to the person:

B. Privately. We shouldn’t be bringing others into the mix before we’ve approached the person on a one-on-one basis first. We’re never supposed to air our grievances with others first. We’re not even supposed to ask others to pray for the offending person until we’ve first gone and spoken to that person individually, and privately, confidentially.

Unfortunately, some people go to others with a *“gossip prayer request.”* That’s when you tell someone about all the faults of someone because they’ve done you wrong, in the guise of a prayer request. That’s just plain ole’ gossip and God’s not in it. That’s not His way of handling conflict resolution. In fact, that is adding to the conflict.

God’s plan for handling the problem calls for us to go to the person personally, privately and confidentially before bringing anyone else into the mix. That also means that we’re not supposed to confront anyone in a group setting...but in private only.

And, if the matter is resolved, then it needs to remain private forever, never to be brought up in public. It’s done. It’s over. It’s resolved. Forget it and move on, and don’t keep bringing it up!

Now if it doesn’t get resolved, there is another step that Scripture tells us to take, and we’ll talk about that in a moment. Third, we are to go to the person:

C. Redemptively. The last part of vs. 15 says, *“If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”* That implies that we’re to go and speak to the offending person personally and privately with the hope of resolving the problem without having to drag out a list of grievances. Reconciliation and restoration is the goal, not

retaliation. Retaliation only makes you feel better – and that’s only for a while. But with reconciliation and restoration as the goal, there is every reason to believe that you’ll both come away from the encounter closer to each another than ever before.

Woodrow Wilson used to say, *“If you come at me with your fists doubled, I think I can promise you that mine will be doubled as fast as yours.”*

Listen, in the church and among brothers and sisters in Christ, we have to remember that in the middle of a disagreement our fellow believer is not the enemy. Our enemy is the devil, and he’s the one behind any divisiveness between believers.

Our goal of going and speaking to someone who has offended us is redemption. It’s restoring a right relationship between fellow-believers. Fourth, the Bible says that we’re to go:

D. Quickly. **Hebrews 12:14-15 (NIV)** says, *“Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.”*

The longer the offense remains without any attempt to resolve it, the deeper the divide can become. Allowing the “sore” to fester is not going to bring healing. If you think a festering sore is just going to go away, you’re deceived and you’re playing right into the devil’s hand.

I tell people in counseling, all the time: *“If you keep on doing the same things, the same things are going to happen.”* The point is, the cycle has to be stopped, there has to be a change of behavior, and it needs to happen quickly.

The Bible refers to this issue as *“a bitter root.”* A root is what nourishes and feeds and causes a plant to grow to grow. The analogy is that when we let bitterness take root in our minds, that issue, whatever it is, will become bigger and bigger and will lead to more and deeper bitterness. And nothing does more damage to the church’s effectiveness in reaching the lost for Christ than when Christians have trouble getting along with one another. God knows it, and satan knows it too, and he’ll try to exploit it. So, that is why we need to resolve any differences quickly. The longer the offense remains without any attempt to resolve it, the more time is wasted

trying to put out fires rather than starting fires of evangelism. We will become distracted from fulfilling the purpose God has given to us to accomplish.

Ephesians 5:16 (NIV) says that we are supposed to be *“making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.”* And we can’t make the most of our time if we’re constantly putting our fires of hurt feelings and petty arguments.

But what are we to do if the first step doesn’t end in restoration? That is when we are to take:

2. The Buddy Approach (16) *“But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”* (NIV)

Jesus says that if the first step doesn’t bring about a resolution, we’re then to take two other believers with us in a second attempt at resolving things with the offending person.

These should be people that both parties respect, people of unquestionable character.

The purpose of this approach is so that the truth can be clearly known...and any misunderstanding of the truth can be clearly exposed. Perhaps these outside observers can see what you can’t see because you’re so close to the problem. This is exactly the approach married couples take when they agree to see a marriage counselor. They come to an understanding that because they can’t objectively deal with the problem, someone else must be brought in who can look at things more objectively.

Again, the purpose of this approach is the same as the first: You’re seeking restoration. It’s not a matter of ganging up on someone, or casting blame, or chastising, but resolving the issue that is threatening unity. You want the issue resolved and you want the relationship restored. And if you want it bad enough, you’ll take whatever steps are necessary to bring it about.

But what if even the second approach does not lead to restoration? What if you’ve taken the individual approach and the buddy approach, and there is still a conflict? What do you do then? That leads to:

3. The Church-wide Approach (17) *“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church...”* (NIV)

If the first two approaches don’t work, it now needs to be brought to the attention of the whole church because it is now affecting the church’s ability to accomplish its mission.

In the church-wide approach, the “*two witnesses*” need to testify of their objective involvement and their desire along with you that the matter be resolved in an amicable way.

I think it’s important to note that this approach is a last resort, It’s one final attempt to resolve the issue and bring about restoration and restore harmony within the body of Christ. It’s not the first step, but a final attempt at resolution.

I’m not going to get into the format of such a church-wide approach, but suffice it to say that hopefully, when this happens and all the facts of the issue are out in the open, both parties will set aside the offense, and restoration will occur.

But if not, then there is one last approach that Scripture says must be taken.

4. The Non-Believer Approach (17b) says, “...*and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*” (NIV)

The word “*treat him*” is rendered “*let him be*” in the KJV That phrase is a present imperative – a command. We’re commanded to let the person be left to their sinful attitude and their shame.

Now, on the surface, this may sound really mean or cruel, but it was not meant in this way. Jesus was the one who said it, so we know it was not said with malice or hatred, but with love and grace. He said it redemptively and with the goal of bringing the person to a place where he/she could experience God’s love and forgiveness up close and personal.

Specifically, treating the offending person as though he/she is not really a believer would mean three things: First, it means:

A. Not being “best friends” with this person. 2 Cor. 6:14 (NIV) reminds us, “*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?*”

I think it’s significant that Jesus said to treat such people as tax collectors. The tax collectors of that day were deemed “*traitors*” by their fellow Jews. They were known for not having the interests of others in mind, just furthering their own interests, padding their own pockets. They were Jews, but they worked for the Roman government and usually became rich by charging other Jews excessive taxes, then gathering up those taxes and

keeping a large chunk for themselves. That is why you usually see the descriptive word, “*despised*” before their title.

In the same way, while it may be true that the offending person might still be a believer, just not fellowship with the Lord, it is also apparent that he/she is not really interested in furthering the kingdom. Otherwise he/she would have been willing to set aside trivial matters for the bigger cause.

It’s obvious that this person is not going to be a helper, but rather a hindrance in the achieving of God’s mission for His church.

We have to remember that Satan is still involved. This person has chosen to NOT be in fellowship with other believers. I heard someone put it this way; they have determined to NOT be two fellows in the same ship with believers. This brother or sister who chooses not to reconcile is charting their own course, and is swimming in waters outside where God is leading.

But while we don’t have to be buddy-buddy with the person, treating them as non-believers means

B. Praying for Them. Jesus said in **Luke 6:28 (NIV)** to, “...*bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.*”

Just because we can’t see eye-to-eye, and just because they’ve chosen to chart their own course doesn’t mean that we’re to stop praying for them. After all, their greatest need is for forgiveness and a restored relationship with Jesus – things that non-believers need. They just need to let go and let God lead their life again, and restore the joy of their salvation.

And finally, treating them as a non-believer means to:

C. Be Friendly and Kind to Them. Jesus said in **Luke 6:35 (NIV)** “*But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.*”

People need a warm smile and tender kindness rather than a cold shoulder. They need to see God’s love radiating out of us. Remember, there is still hope for them, and perhaps our acts of kindness and love will help bring them back.

John MacArthur says, *“The purpose of the ostracism is not to punish but to awaken, and it must be done therefore in humble love and never in a spirit of self-righteous superiority.”*

As the Apostle Paul says in **2 Thessalonians 3:15 (NIV)** *“Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”*

Conclusion: As I said in the beginning, I am glad I am not preaching this message out of necessity. But let it serve as a warning – Satan would love to get his foot in the door of this church and disrupt our unity.

So let us be on guard, and let us resolve to move forward in accomplishing God’s mission for us. Let us keep sharing the good news. Let us keep serving with a spirit of love and humility as we allow God to work through us.

Yes, the farther we go, the more exciting and fulfilling it will become as we are allowed to participate in His unfolding mission.

But at the same time, the farther we go, the more opposition and challenges we’ll face. That is why we need to be in our commitment and in our purpose.

If Satan is going to attack, it will probably be in the area of our relationships with one another. So, let’s not allow him any latitude, not allow him any foothold. Instead, let us pursue unity.