

Matthew 5:21–26; 18:15–20 and Reconciling with One Another

Prayer

Introductory Questions

- What causes relational conflict within a church community?
- When seeking reconciliation with another person, what are some of the most important principles and/or practices to follow?

Overview of the Lesson

This lesson focuses on how to pursue reconciliation with others, whether they have a complaint against us or they have sinned against us. Either way, our responsibility is to go to that person—quickly and directly.

Reconciliation is a prominent theme in the Bible:

- **Apart from God’s grace, we are *unreconciled* (separated in our relationship) to God and in danger of his eternal judgment:** “They [the unbelieving Gentiles] are darkened in their understanding, excluded [or alienated] from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them and because of the hardness of their hearts” (Eph. 4:18).
- **Jesus’s death and resurrection created the only way for us to be reconciled to God:** “For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, then how much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life” (Rom. 5:10).
- **We are reconciled to God when we turn from our sins and trust in Jesus:** “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1, cf. vv. 10–11).
- **God calls us to help others to be reconciled to him through Jesus (vertical reconciliation):** “Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18).
- **God calls us to pursue peace with one another (horizontal reconciliation):** “So then, let us pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another” (Rom. 14:19).

In this lesson we study how to pursue reconciliation with others by focusing on two main passages of Scripture. In Matthew 5:21–26, Jesus instructs us how to reconcile with others who have a complaint against us—whether that person is a believer or an “adversary.” In Matthew 18:15–20, Jesus instructs us what to do if a believer sins against us. We conclude this lesson by summarizing what the Bible teaches about pursuing reconciliation with others.

1. Reconciling with Those Who Have a Complaint against You

- “21 You have heard that it was said to our ancestors, “Do not murder,” and whoever murders will be subject to judgment. 22 But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Whoever insults his brother or sister, will be subject to the court. Whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be subject to hellfire.” (Matt. 5:21–22)
- “23 So if you are offering your gift on the altar, and there you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matt. 5:23–24)
- “25 Reach a settlement quickly with your adversary while you’re on the way with him to the court, or your adversary will hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out of there until you have paid the last penny.” (Matt. 5:25–26)

As part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus outlines the righteousness that he requires by explaining six contrasts/antitheses (Matt. 5:21–48). He uses this general pattern: “You have heard that it was said to our ancestors: _____, but I tell you _____.” He contrasts “the literal, legalistic teaching of the Pharisees” with his expectations on the topics of murder and anger (5:21–26), adultery and lust (5:27–30), divorce, remarriage, and adultery (5:31–32), oaths (5:33–37), retaliation (5:38–42), and love for enemies (5:43–48) (Osborne, *Matthew*, 186).

In verse 21, Jesus addresses murder, one of the worst sins humans commit against one another. The Jewish people knew that murder was a violation of God’s commands and that it deserved punishment (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17). But Jesus taught that the root cause of murder is anger—unrighteous, self-centered, hate-filled anger. For all who persisted in such anger, judgment awaited—first in the local court, then in the highest court of the Jews (the Sanhedrin), then in God’s court (leading to hell!) (v. 22; cf. 5:29–30). Anger often leads to insults and may lead to murder, but unrighteous anger always begins in the heart (Matt. 15:19).

In verses 23–24, Jesus calls his listeners to reconcile with those in the believing community. If someone was offering a sacrifice at the altar and realized that a brother had a complaint against them (v. 23), they must stop the external expression of worship and seek reconciliation (v. 24).

In verses 25–26, Jesus calls his listeners to reconcile with adversaries, presumably those outside the believing community. They should reach a settlement with adversaries on the way to court to avoid a terrible escalation of the process (v. 25). When there is no reconciliation, adversaries often demand “the last penny”—full payment (v. 26) (Osborne, 186–192).

- How does unrighteous anger express itself in your life? How can we fight it?
- How should we approach others with complaints against us?

2. Reconciling with Those Who Have Sinned Against You

- “15 If your brother sins against you, go tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother. 16 But if he won’t listen, take one or two others with you, so that “by the testimony of two or three witnesses every fact may be established.” 17 If he doesn’t pay attention to them, tell the church. If he doesn’t pay attention even to the church, let him be like a Gentile and a tax collector to you.” (Matt. 18:15–17)
- “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven.” (Matt. 18:18)
- “19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you on earth agree about any matter that you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them.” (Matt. 18:19–20)

Matthew 18 focuses on relationships in a community of believers. Jesus taught about the connections between the kingdom of God and humility (vv. 1–4), warned against causing others to sin (vv. 5–9), and addressed how to respond to wandering believers (vv. 10–14). Jesus also addressed how to confront believers who have sinned against us but have not yet repented (vv. 15–20) and the need to forgive others (vv. 21–35) (Osborne, 45).

In verses 15–17, Jesus outlined a three-stage process when a believer “sins against you” (v. 15). The entire process ends *if and when* the person turns away from his or her sin, which constitutes reconciliation. If the person will not repent, we move on to the next stage. Stage one is private confrontation: “go tell him his fault, between you and him alone” (v. 15). Stage two involves bringing others to witness the facts and to call the person to repent: “take one or two others with you, so that “by the testimony of two or three witnesses every fact may be established”” (v. 16; Deut. 19:15). Stage three is bringing the matter to the entire community: “tell the church” (v. 17). If the person will not repent, we treat them “like a Gentile and a tax collector” (a nonbeliever)—resulting in excommunication from the community (v. 17).

In verse 18, Jesus affirms that “God is behind the community’s decisions regarding forgiveness or condemnation of its wandering sheep/members” (Osborne, 687). In other words, our decisions to “bind” (confirm) willful, persistent sin (which leads to excommunication if there is no repentance) or to “loose” (forgive) sin are confirmed in heaven by God himself.

In verses 19–20, Jesus teaches that God the Father grants the prayer requests of those who seek wisdom and guidance in these disciplinary matters (v. 19). Where two or three witnesses (to the persistent sinning) gather in Jesus’s name, he assures us he is present (v. 20; cf. v. 16).

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why is it often difficult to obey Jesus’s teaching in this passage?/What can go wrong? • Why is church discipline an essential part of maintaining Christian community? |
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Sound Doctrine: Reconciling with One Another

Below are steps to follow if someone has a complaint against you (steps 1–3) or someone has sinned against you yet has not yet repented (steps 1–7). The process stops when you and/or the other person turn away from sin and fellowship is restored.

1. **Identify the Problem and the Requirement to Go:** While it may be tempting to ignore conflict in the body of Christ, the first step is to acknowledge that there is *a problem* (“That person has a complaint against me” and/or “That person sinned against me”) and *the requirement to go* (“Jesus commands me to go”) (Matt. 5:23–25; 18:15). Even if someone sinned against us, we too are disobeying Jesus if we refuse to go to the person.
2. **Pray for Wisdom, Humility, and Boldness:** Do not go to third parties to the conflict to gossip, slander, or “ask for advice” about the broken relationship. However, go to God in prayer before, during, and after going privately to the person. Ask for wisdom (the skill to navigate the conflict biblically), humility (particularly for the ability to humbly examine your own sinful thoughts and actions), and boldness (to speak the truth, regardless of who is wrong) (Matt. 18:19–20; Eph. 4:15; James 1:5–8; 1 Pet. 5:5).
3. **Go Privately to the Person:** Again, do not go to third parties. Go directly to the person. Be open and honest: admit your wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness (if applicable) and/or identify the person’s sin and call for repentance (if applicable) (Matt. 5:23–25; 18:15). If you are the offending party and you are willing to repent, this is usually where the process ends; you have confessed sin and asked for forgiveness. But what if there is no repentance?
4. **Bring in Other Witnesses:** If the other person will not turn away from their sin, invite “witnesses” into the process—ideally your church leaders. They witness the facts of the situation and call for repentance (Matt. 18:16). Note: we do not admit a charge against elders unless there are at least two witnesses (1 Tim. 5:19).
5. **Tell it to the Church:** If a person still refuses to repent, we bring the facts to the entire community (Matt. 18:17). This is yet another opportunity to call the person to turn from their sin, and we warn them of the consequences of persisting in their sin (see #6 below).
6. **Remove the Unrepentant Person:** While it is not our responsibility to judge those outside the church, we remove people from fellowship *who claim to be Christians and yet refuse to repent* (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:1–13). As part of the process, we warn the person concerning Satan’s destructive influences (praying they will come to their senses and be saved) and affirm our willingness to receive them back into fellowship if they repent (1 Cor. 5:5).
7. **Receive Back the Repentant Person:** If and when the person repents and desires to return to fellowship, we receive, forgive, and comfort the person (2 Cor. 2:5–11).

- What questions or comments do you have about this process?
- Identify and explain one or more ways you could grow in these practices?

Prayer

Applying God's Word

Use these two pages to reflect on and apply this lesson. Schedule a time to discuss your answers and pray with family members and friends during the week, and/or as part of your next group meeting.

1. Renew Your Mind

- a. What did you learn about **God the Father, God the Son, and/or God the Holy Spirit** (concerning their character qualities, words, and/or actions)?
- b. What did you realize about **your sinful tendencies** (concerning your desires, values, thoughts, words, and/or actions)? "I sin against God by _____."
- c. What did you learn about **God's will for your life** (concerning your desires, values, thoughts, words, and/or actions)? "God desires that I _____."

2. Memorize the Word

Identify one or more verses of Scripture from this lesson that you plan to memorize and write them out below.

3. Obey the Word

In response to this lesson:

- a. How do you want to grow in **your character**? “By God’s grace, I want to become more (or less) _____. I will work on that by _____.”
- b. How can you apply this information in **your words and/or actions** (with your family, church community, neighbors, and/or coworkers)? “By God’s grace, I will _____.”

4. Express Your Desires

- a. Write out one or more prayers to God in response to this lesson.
- b. What other prayer requests do you want to share with your family and friends?