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## Matthew 5:23-24, 18:15-20

Conflict & Peacemaking:

Gently Restore

(Or “What to Do When We Sin Against Each Other”)

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Today I want us each to recall to mind a relationship we have trouble with. I want us to think of the name of an individual, a person, who we are currently in conflict with, or have been in conflict with before. Think of a family member you love but keep fighting with, a neighbor you keep arguing with, a coworker or supervisor you can't work with, or a brother or sister in Christ who just rubs you the wrong way.

I know this is uncomfortable, but I want us to intentionally think of their name. Do you have a name in mind? You can even write it down, unless it's a person sitting near you. Then I wouldn't write it down. I hope today's message will give you some clarity on what to do next with this relationship, if you should have a conversation with this person, and if yes, how to do so in a God-honoring way.

In our sermon series, [Conflict & Peacemaking](#), we're following the [Four Gs of Peacemaking](#) from Ken Sande's book [The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict](#). Today we're going through (G3) Gently Restore. As we go through today's sermon and next week too, ask God, “How does what I'm learning apply to this relationship?” For example:

**G1: Glorify God** — Make it your mission from here forward to bring God glory through this relationship. Even if it's one of the most difficult relationships you have, decide that you want to honor God with your actions starting today. Even if you messed up yesterday, you can begin again on the right path.

**G2: Get the Log Out of Your Eye** — Two weeks ago we learned the importance of humble Christ-dependent self examination. In your own mind, review this relationship and ask yourself, “How have I contributed to the conflict? What am I responsible for?” There are two sides to every story. Try to see this conflict through their eyes, and then bring anything you need to repent of before the Lord.

**G3: Gently Restore** - This is our topic this week. We're talking about going to the person directly to potentially confess and hopefully correct the conflict.

**G4: Go and Be Reconciled** - Next week we'll finish with the final G, restoring the relationship.

Let's pray then begin. *Father, it's difficult to recall to mind those names or relationships that have hurt us or are hurting us right now. We know this hurt doesn't take you by surprise, and that you've told us how broken relationships can experience healing in the Bible. Help us understand your plan for healing here. Amen.*

Today we're looking at two texts, the first which explains what to do if someone feels we have sinned against them, and the second which explains what to do if we feel someone has sinned against us or God.

### **What to do if someone feels you've sinned against them (Mt. 5:23-24)**

In the Sermon on The Mount, Jesus preaches on murder. He quotes the law of God found in the Ten Commandments, “You shall not murder” and then says, “But I tell you...” (v. 21-22) Jesus here is not changing the law, or writing a new one, but revealing the heart of God's law, the true standard. He says this:

**Matthew 5:22** But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. (NIV®)

Jesus is warning us that hate in the heart is just as sinful as hate acted out. God doesn't just judge us by our actions, he judges us by our thoughts. So this is the context that comes right before verses 23-24. If you know someone is angry with you, perhaps even willing to call you names behind your back like “Raca” or “fool”—raca is an Aramaic term meaning “empty” or “idiot”—then you should go talk with them.<sup>1</sup> Where does Jesus teach us this? We find this in the very next verses.

### **Go and seek reconciliation with the one you've offended.**

**Matthew 5:23-24** says, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. (NIV®)

**Story:** Jesus wants his Jewish audience to imagine a man and his family taking a sacrifice to the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus is in Galilee right now, which is about 70~ miles away, so this family doesn't travel to Jerusalem very often, but this is a special occasion. Because the harvest has been good, or they're feeling extra grateful, he takes his family to Jerusalem to give a freewill offering of a male calf, sheep or goat (Lev 22:17-25). This is a solemn and costly moment. The father takes their lamb, maybe one they purchased or one they brought from home, to the priests who takes it into the court of the priests to sacrifice it. But as the lamb is lead to the altar, the Holy Spirit convicts this man's heart. He remembers the argument he had with his neighbor over the harvest, how angry they got with each other, and how they didn't resolve the issue. Jesus is saying, “It's more important to stop the sacrifice, go back to Galilee, and get right with your brother, than it is to offer this sacrifice knowing your brother has something against you.”

**Lesson:** When Jesus' audience heard this, it would have stunned them. Jesus is saying **reconciliation** (which means “to make peace”) is more important than **religion**, even costly acts of worship. Jesus isn't interested in empty religion, but a relationship with God that changes our lives. It doesn't matter if it's **inconvenient**, if the one offended is just next door or miles away. The verses also don't tell us if this individual is **guilty** or **innocent**. It doesn't matter. If his brother has something against him, **rightfully** or **wrongfully**, and whether it was **intentional** or **unintentional**, he should go and talk with the one offended.

**Application:** Think back to your name, the person you're in conflict with. As a believer, Jesus wants us to take the **first steps** to make the relationship right again.

- *If the person we've hurt is a fellow Christian, Jesus sees reconciliation as our top priority.* It's more important than anything else you have on your calendar, more important than your personal devotional or quiet time, than your ministry meeting, than coming to church, than giving your tithes and offerings. **(S7)** **John 13:35** says, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” If we aren't reconciled, that hurts our witness and it prevents us from worshipping. *If we hurt our brother or sister in Christ, and now we're worshipping in the same room as them, do you think they're going to be*

<sup>1</sup> Tyndale Commentary: Matthew 5:22.

*thinking about Jesus during the service or about us?* Don't wait for them to make the **first move**. Jesus is calling each of us to act first. If you know someone in **this church** has something against you, I want to encourage you to get right with them before you go home today, before the service next week.

- *If the person we've hurt is not a Christian, reconciliation is still a priority.* You can still approach them with a humble attitude and ask for forgiveness. When they ask, "Why?" explain that this is what Christ has called you to do. *Go and seek reconciliation with the one you've offended.*

## **What to do if someone sins against you or God (Mt. 18:15-20)**

Later in Matthew, Jesus outlines what to do if you're not the offender, but the one who has been offended, or if God himself has been offended by the sin. Before we talk to someone about the sin, we need to decide if we should go to them at all. The first of **five steps** begins with understanding if we should go at all.

**Matthew 18:15-17** "If your 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. 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.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (NIV®)

### **Step One: Overlook minor offenses**

Before you go to the person you have in mind, we need to determine if the sin is significant enough for that. Ken Sande gives us these **five steps** but also asks **four questions** (in the first step) to help us determine if we should address the sin. If you can answer "no" to all four, then you probably don't need to go.

1. **Is it dishonoring God?** Is this sin so significant that those who aren't Christians are thinking poorly of Christ? Is his reputation under attack? Do others think poorly of God, or just of them?
2. **Is it damaging your relationship?** Ken writes, "If you are unable to forgive an offense—that is, if your feelings, thoughts, words, or actions toward another person have been altered for more than a short period of time—the offense is probably too serious to overlook." (pg. 151) If you can't get over it, go!
3. **Is it hurting others?** Is it damaging others physically or emotionally, such as family abuse or adultery? Is it damaging others spiritually? Others are being lead astray from faith in Jesus by their actions.
4. **Is it hurting the offender?** If the sin is so serious it is harming the one committing it, such as alcohol or drug abuse, or harming them spiritually, such as trying out other belief systems or living and sleeping together before marriage, we should go and have a talk.

Now I want you to notice that we're not just discussing sin against us personally (conflict with me) but also sin against God (conflict with God). The Bible calls us to address both sin against God and sin against us. However, it's not our role to play God, which is why really need to wrestle with these four questions, and whether or not we should overlook the offense.

Several years ago I worked with a fellow believer at a church, let's call him **Tom**. I found that what had initially seemed like a good relationship very quickly deteriorated. Early on, I did something worth rebuking and Tom rebuked me. I apologized for what I did wrong, but he continued to treat me harshly. I noticed pretty soon that it wasn't just me, but others too. Now I didn't have these questions to ask, so my first solution to wait and see if it would get better, but it didn't. Time didn't heal our relationship. It had been

going on for a couple months, and I was at the point of almost quitting when I finally decided to talk to him. When we met, I explained how I felt he didn't like me, and he very quickly told me that wasn't true. We discussed our relationship, he apologized, and after that it got better. It never became a good relationship. There isn't much of a happy ending to this story. I share it not because I did it right, but because I tried to do it right. God calls us to that. We're to pray, make our best effort to follow the guidelines he gives us, and step out in faith. *Step One: Overlook minor offenses.*

## **Step Two: Correct gently and privately**

**Correct:** I don't really like the NIV's translation, "Go and point out their fault..." The NASB more clearly says, "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault..." We're not just to stand back and point, we're to help open their eyes to their own sin. The problem with sin is that we often can't see our own sin, we're blind to it. It's like we hold up a **mirror** before them, helping them see their own sins, which leads to true change. Did you know modern mirrors were invented in the 1800s by a man who applied "a thin layer of metallic silver to one side of a pane of clear glass"? There is silver, there is value, in seeing ourselves clearly. Mirrors show us our blemishes, and it hurts, but they also allow us to deal with the blemishes.

The word "show him" comes from the Greek word for "**rebuke**" but if we look at the context, Jesus is not telling us to condemn or criticize the one in the wrong, but to try and restore him or her to obedience to God. Our passage is sandwiched between **two parables** about restoration. The first parable tells the story of a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep to find one lost sheep. The second parable of the unmerciful servant tells us to forgive others for their minor sins because God has forgiven us of our great sins. Our passage comes between them, telling us the goal of step two is not judgment, but restoration, correction.

**Gently: Galatians 6:1a** says, "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently..." (NIV®) G3 is "Gently Restore." Now I can think of situations where you correct harshly, such as when your child runs towards the street, or if someone operates dangerous machinery in a foolish way, but when dealing with sin, we need to be especially thoughtful. We shouldn't think, "What will make me the most satisfied?" But, "How can I speak in a way that the other person will hear what I am trying to say?" If restoration and correction is our goal, not feeling justified, the way we approach the conversation will be entirely different. This one aspect of the faith that should separate the church from the world. When the world rebukes, it tears down and pushes out. We see this with the failure of celebrities and politicians all the time. When the church rebukes, it does so gently to heal and mend.

**Privately:** The Bible says clearly this conversation is to take place "just between the two of you." That means it shouldn't take place on Facebook, or in a committee meeting, but face-to-face if possible, or on the phone if necessary. Ken Sande talks about keeping the **circle** of those in the know as small as possible for as long as possible. Maybe talk to one or two trusted advisors, but as step of preparation. In other words, I speak to another to get their advice for if I should approach the other person, and if so, they help coach me through how to do it in a God-honoring way. *Step Two: Correct gently and privately.*

## **Step Three: Take one or two others along**

Now Lord-willing, step two will resolve the situation. You'll go humbly to talk, and the other person will humbly receive what you have to say. In your mind, are you thinking about the name of the person you need to go to? Do you think they will receive it well or push back? Jesus explains what to do if they won't listen to correction. He says, "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.'" (v. 16) Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 19:15, which

is in a passage on “Laws Concerning Witnesses” (ESV). If someone doesn’t repent, the solution is to not cover the problem up, not to ignore it, but to address it fairly and justly. Jesus uses a courtroom illustration for what happens next because we’re to incorporate courtroom fairness and courtroom justice.

The **plaintiff**, the one who initiated the conversion, is to bring two or three **witnesses** to still try to correct gently and privately. In the Bible, a **witness** can be someone who sees something happen (Lk. 24:48) or someone who knows what’s is true of God, what is right and wrong (Rev 1:5, 3:14, 11:3). We don’t bring others along to gang-up on the **defendant**, but rather to help both parties see their blind spots, their sins, their role in the conflict. Witnesses act as mediators, as unbiased arbitrators who can help us work through our conflict honestly. Before God, the supreme court, we’re all **guilty**; but we’re also declared **righteous** through Christ. When we approach others about their sin, we don’t approach in condemnation or as judge, but as a fellow-pilgrims working out what it means to be both broken and forgiven at the same time.

Lord willing, they’ll listen, you’ll listen, and the conflict will be resolved. But what if they don’t listen? What if they reject what you have to say and continue in the sin? This is why Jesus gives us the church, to help us deal with our sins in a higher courtroom. *Step Three: Take one or two others along.*

#### **Step Four: Tell it to the church (Elders)**

Jesus says, “If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church” (v. 17). This word for church, *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία), means a local gathering of believers, an assembly, a congregation. Now if we read other parts of the Bible, God gives us leaders of the church called Elders (1 Tim 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, 1 Pet 5:1-11). It’s their job to oversee and manage the household of God. So I don’t believe this passage is telling us to go and start telling everyone in the church about the sins of the individual. Rather, if this is a courtroom, God has given the role of judges, the lower court, to the Elders. It’s their responsibility to represent heaven’s interests in this conflict. This is why v. 18 says, “...whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” A more accurate translation is “shall have been bound” and “shall have been loosed.” Their job is to represent God’s will, the highest court, with fear, trembling, and prayer.

If this doesn’t work, I do think Scriptures allow for the Elders to tell the issue to the entire church, because together, everyone needs to treat the one who won’t repent, as a “pagan or a tax collector.” (v. 17)

#### **Step Five: Treat him/her as a nonbeliever**

Pagans and tax collectors are just the kind of people Jesus loves to spend time with. Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners (Matt 9:10). His disciple Matthew, the one who wrote this book, the gospel of Matthew, is a former tax collector who ate and drank with Jesus (Matt 10:3). Eugene Peterson wrote *The Message*, which is a modern interpretation of the New Testament. He translates 17, “If he won’t listen to the church, you’ll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God’s forgiving love.” (MSG) That’s what we do with non-Christians. We tell them of their sin, invite them to repent, and offer God’s forgiving love.

In other parts of the New Testament, there are examples of Scripture saying to expel unrepentant sinners or divisive people from the church (1 Cor 5:13, Titus 3:10). But we leave that decision to the Board of Elders. Until we’re instructed otherwise, we love them like nonbelievers. *Step five, treat him/her as a nonbeliever.*

Do you feel a bit overwhelmed by this process? You just didn’t want to be conflict anymore, and now we’re talking about church discipline? Part of being a family of Christ, is holding each other accountable and following the proper steps. Step two, correct gently and privately, should come before step four, tell it to the

church. But usually we tell it to the church, through gossip, before it ever reaches the individual. Jesus is in his grace, gave us a loving, mutually-beneficial way to deal with conflict and sin in a healthy way. Let's take advantage of it. I want to close by sharing my big idea and one final thought. My big idea is this.

***When we sin against each other, restore each other as Christ restores us.***

To follow the way of Christ, takes patience, perseverance, wisdom, discernment, and a lot of prayer. It's worth it, because that is what Christ has done for us. He has approached us in our sin, and instead of condemning us, he died in our places, taking the punishment we deserve upon himself. Jesus corrects us patiently, he forgives us lovingly, he deals with our sins firmly. Then he clothes us in his righteousness. He gives us his holiness, the holiness we've done nothing to deserve. Let's approach each other like that. *When we sin against each other, restore each other as Christ restores us.*

Think once more of that name, that person. How can you treat them like Christ has treated you? How can you love, forgive, and even approach them in their sin gently and patiently? I want us each to pray silently for about **30 seconds** for the one on our hearts. Pray that you'll glorify God with what you do next, ask Jesus to reveal your own sins and role in the conflict to you, and ask him if you should go and speak to the other person. Would you do that? *When we sin against each other, restore each other as Christ restores us.* Let's have a time of silence, then I'll pray.

*Pastor Jonathan Romig wrote and preached this message for the people of Cornerstone Congregational Church. [Click here to listen to more sermons](#) or [click here to read our story](#).*