

Gospel of Matthew

18:15-20

“Things bound on Earth”



Vs. 15 – The text begins with Jesus drawing out a scenario where you or I have taken offense at something someone has said or done to us. It is viewed by us as a sin against our person and we can't get over it until it is properly resolved.



The first question to ask here is why must an offense be resolved? I mean, people out there in the world live with unresolved conflict in their families, with their neighbors, and with their co-workers, seemingly without blinking an eye! It is normal to them - an accepted part of life for most people. Most people have little or no skills to resolve conflict between themselves and another person! So instead of trying to resolve it, they just perpetuate it and, if anything, ratchet up the intensity! Instinctively, people think that conflict is about winning or losing, so they go about their days with their claws barely sheathed and at the ready, and their snarl barely contained and ready to burst forth as soon as they sense they are in danger - and even before. Some people are so touchy that they operate under the philosophy that the best defense is a good offense! So they look for something to be offended about. And if there is nothing, then they can at least imagine it and go after people before those people can go after them! It is called "*a chip on their shoulder*"! We have all known people, (probably a great many of them), that live with a chip on their shoulder. It can be that they assume things they don't like about a person. It might be that they don't like Germans, or Poles, or Hollanders, or people of color, or old people, or young people, or large people or skinny people, or people with a pimple on their nose! And once they decide they don't like someone, there is no going back. They are locked in to a pattern of offending and taking offense!

But the entire New Testament is instructive that the Creator/God hates conflict and has instructed us to do everything in our power to resolve conflict. Why does God hate conflict? Well, since God is eternal and His past goes backward into infinity also, we don't know what creations God may have created before and what conflicts He may have had with them – at least previous to His creation of the angels of the heavenly realms. We know nothing of the activities of God before the angels. But we do know that before creation, conflict broke out in the heavenly realms at some point, probably long before the earth was formed! The Bible seems to indicate that Lucifer, a highly placed angel, led a massive revolt of the angels undoubtedly under the guise of oppression and freedom – *“God is oppressing us and we will rebel and be free.”* It is the same lie he fed to the first humans, because he knows it plays well to the independent mind and to a creature with free will. But in heaven his success was more limited. Only about a third of the angels followed Lucifer/Satan into the abyss of rebellion and conflict with God! But obviously God could not resolve that conflict because Satan would not cooperate, so the Bible tells us that Satan and his minions were cast out of heaven down to earth. Why God then chose to put humans on earth also is unexplained. But the presence of Satan and demons on earth does explain the problem of evil in creation.



God is properly on the top of the social pyramid. There is no other way it can work since He is the Creator and all others are created by Him and for Him. No one else can be in charge or creation would be a chaotic disaster! Case in point is the condition of this world which we are so familiar with - if we know anything about the sorry history of humanity. Humanity switched allegiances early on and continues to follow Satan as its pseudo god! So God, who is a God of order, cannot allow it so He works to undo the disastrous and chaotic effects of rebellions! All this to explain why this great conflict and disharmony in the world has always grieved God.

So it should not surprise us when Jesus makes it clear that He does not want His followers to be involved in creating or maintaining conflict! In fact, He wants us to be healers of conflict! Conflict is an open and festering sore and can consume people for years! The person or persons we have conflict with will speak badly of us for as long as that conflict continues, and we will reciprocate. Our anger is piqued in the process, and when we are angry we are very capable of the most ungodly words and acts! All of this runs contrary to the principles of the Kingdom of God. All of it will stop our personal growth and development in its tracks because we are giving a foothold for Satan to get his claws into us, and when he is holding us fast, we cease listening to the Spirit of God! We act like we are still members of the Kingdom of Hell! We act like Jesus has no right to temper us – to tell us what we can and cannot do!



So God wants the disciple of Christ – ALL disciples of Christ - to resolve conflict. This is very much a part of our task as disciples of Jesus. We must be careful not to start it, but if we encounter it already in progress, we are to do everything in our power to bring peace to the situation. (Revisit Beatitudes)

This is an important role that Christians are to play in the New Creation. The Kingdom of God – where people recognize that the will of God is sovereign over the human will – is the New Creation. The New Creation begins with the miracle of salvation which is all God's doing - a gift to us. He insists that all the requirements in our salvation be met by Himself.

Side note: When people compare religions, only the ignoramuses claim that all religions are alike. They are not! All religions insist that a human must achieve their own salvation. Christianity stands alone in the belief that it is impossible for a person to earn their own salvation. God must do that for us if we are to be saved.

Back to salvation. Jesus did all the work of making salvation possible. We can add nothing to it. It is complete, and it is perfect,.. ***PERFECT!*** You cannot try to improve on perfection without spoiling it, right?!

However, after we have in faith and trust, requested, accepted, and coronated Jesus (invited Him to take control of the control center), the Holy Spirit takes up residence inside of us and it is up to us to cooperate with Him. That is where acts of faith are employed – where faith and resolve steer our will! We are absolutely committed and determined to follow Jesus and His teachings because we have given our allegiance to Him! So we give up our ungodly impulses, our uncontrolled emotions - we give up our belief that we have the right to do that which is wrong or shameful – even if we could get away with it. Conversely, we embrace the fact that we are in the employ of a good, holy, and loving God who uses His people to love the people of this world and call them to switch sides – to request the salvation Jesus has provided, and pass over from the Kingdom of Hell into the Kingdom of Heaven!



So back to the text. Conflict is a fact of life. As long as we are living in a world where we rub shoulders with other people, we will have conflict with some of them. Sometimes our personality seem to be incompatible with their personality! Sometimes our desires conflict with theirs. Sometimes people thoughtlessly or purposefully say and/or do things that hurt our feeling,s and leave us “offended”. It is the will of God that we do the grown-up adult, mature thing and try to resolve it.



I see two factors at play in this text. The first is that we work to resolve a conflict because we don't want the stress and drama of it in our own life. We want to be free of it's stress! We don't want to be reminded of it every time we see that person or persons! It is an uncomfortable thing to come face to face with a person who has offended you. It is why we avoid such people by taking the long way around them! For the follower of Jesus it is a predicament! It feels all wrong (because ***it IS*** wrong)!

The second reason we try very hard to resolve conflict is that we care about the church, and conflict in the church is not good for the work of God within the church, much less for its mission to make more true disciples of Christ. Offended people act like a poison in the church, spreading attitude that affects other people, causing them to adopt the offended person's grievance! The Spirit of God is all about unity. His work flourishes when people are unified – when people are experiencing the love of God in the body of believers. It brings joy and allows people to see the most beautiful acts of God!

But it doesn't happen wherever there is conflict in the church. Growth cannot happen in someone who won't work to resolve their offense taken or offense given!



*I was pastor of another church that was growing very quickly. We were growing so fast that we had to build a new building to accommodate our growth. In the process, some people in the church took exception to certain elements of the building program and became extremely angry and agitated, and continued to press the issue throughout the building program. It was like two different churches – the “**before**” church and the “**after**” church! There was a complete loss of joy, and it became dark/depressing in that church. All momentum was lost! There is *still*, 35 years later, such a sense of loss associated with that experience! It drove home to me the point that division and the church do not mix! Unity keeps us healthy, strong, and focused on the purposes of God! Division makes us sickly, weakens us, and focuses us on the division itself rather than His purposes. It is exactly what Satan wants to bring us over the line back into alignment with his Kingdom of Hell!

So Jesus gives us a formula for resolving our conflicts one way or the other. This formula brings the matter to a conclusion – forcing a conclusion in the interests of ridding the church of the conflict or of ridding it of the person or people that are causing it (if they are unwilling to cooperate with the process).

The outline of the formula:

1. Go show the person their fault (how their actions or words caused offense to you) – This usually will end the matter as you work it out with them.
2. If it remains unresolved and is a big enough matter, go back to the person with one or two others from the church – known and respected for being impartial and wise - (who will act as witnesses, and will perhaps bring some wisdom and perspective to the situation). This will usually be as far as a matter will go. But if it still remains unresolved...
3. Bring the matter to the church. This is how I break this basic 3rd instruction down, since it is not detailed in its implementation, we can use some common sense! I would recommend that an offense, if it is serious enough, be brought to the elder board first (since they are representatives of the church) so that the church body might be spared the potentially heartbreaking ordeal of acting as judge and jury – of judging between adversaries. Church moral can really suffer in situations like this if hearts remain hard. So, if the board decides against one and for the other, and both parties accept the decision, then the matter has to be settled. In fact I wouldn't even go this far with the process if both parties didn't agree to accept the decision of the board. If the one they decide against will not admit they were wrong and become contrite, then they must be expelled from the church! If the board cannot agree, then it should go to the entire church body even though it will be quite traumatic for all. Normally, if the church body has nothing to add, then one or the other or both antagonists must be expelled from the church. If the church body is not unified in the decision, the best thing would be for one or the other of the principle parties involved, for the sake of the church, to voluntarily just step away and find another place to attend church.





Here's how it should ***not be*** handled by you or I. No one should not leave the church because they have been offended. That is a very immature reaction. It is not the way things should be resolved! It is easier, for certain, but if you love the Lord, you must love His church/His bride, and you do things the ***right way*** rather than the easiest way! Every individual that practices avoidance and leaves the body with their tail between their legs has

their character weakened by it! They will not recover from it, but it will remain a sore spot in their mind. The Christian thing to do is to resolve conflict, not ignore, suppress, or run from it. The only way we learn not to offend each other is if we admit that we have been offended and tell each other! We NEED our people to be honest with each other if we are to ever get better at being an oasis of Christ's peace in a chaotic and war-torn world! Honesty administered with kindness, gentleness, mercy, and patience, is a very good and healthy thing!

The one thing I would caution against is going forward on this God-given process on inconsequential matters, or if we find that we are constantly being offended. If we are constantly being offended, then it is probably not their problem but ours for being thin-skinned and easily offended! If that is the case and it is determined by our friends at church or by the board that this is the case, then we who are the accuser will have to be confronted about why we are so touchy! I wonder how many of us would bow to the Elder's decision if it pointed back at ourselves?! Well, it is definitely something to consider in this conflict resolution process.