

**Series:** A Community Founded Upon Jesus

**Scripture:** Matthew 18:15-20

**Title:** Conflict

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## **ME (Introduction)**

Well, good morning again, and welcome to Riverside. My name's Keith and I'm one of the leaders around this place... And this summer we've been looking at what it means to live our lives in community, what it means for us to be the church, to be a family of faith. And this morning we wrap up this series. Today is the last message in the series, and honestly, it's probably the most practical of all passages in the series, because it's about conflict in community.

## **We (tension)**

Isn't it amazing how prone to conflict we human beings are? Think about all the conflict that surrounds us right now.

There's conflict among many nations right now in the world.

There's so much conflict in our own nation right now, over all kinds of things... just look at Washington D.C. this week to see all the conflict and bickering that is going on.

Locally, there is a lot of conflict about government and the local rise in violence.

Even churches, the families of faith, are often marked by conflict right? We regularly hear of church disputes and divisions. Some of us in this room have even observed or have been a part of a fight within a local church.

And of course, there is always conflict inside of the family, be it a marriage, or parenting, or extended family relationships. Families and friendships these days are ravaged with hurt feelings, broken relationships and divorce.

## **God (Scripture)**

Conflict's a big deal, it's inevitable in any relationship, so the Bible gives great incite and wisdom on how to handle conflict when it arises. The Bible gives us very practical direction on this. So if you have your Bible, open up to Matthew chapter 18. If you're using the Bible under you chair, open up to page 749,...

Matt 18:15 “If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. 16 But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. 17 If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won’t accept the church’s decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector.

18 “I tell you the truth, whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.

19 “I also tell you this: If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. 20 For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them.”

### ***Conflict is Inevitable***

Now, notice the words “another believer” in verse 15. This is addressed to Christians. This passage is dealing with believers who are in conflict.

Now, let me just say that this is a big deal. Conflict in the church is going to happen, and it’s a big deal. It’s so important that you and I have a right relationship with each other that Jesus said in Matthew 5:23 “So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, 24 leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.

*(use hands to illustrate opposing sides)*

The thing that keeps coming to my mind when I read this passage is that God is concerned more about relationships than religion...

that God is a lot more concerned about relationships being reconciled than He is about the size of the church offering, or the size of a church building.

God cares a lot more about relationships being filled with love and reconciliation than he is about songs and preaching.... He is. This is a big deal.

We could have the biggest and best Sunday morning church service in town, but if our relationships aren't in order, Jesus says here in Matthew 5 to shut the Sunday service down and go get right with your brother or sister.

And this is completely different than the world's ways. In the world, production is more important than relationships,.... In the world, our image and people's impressions of us are more important than real relationships. But that's not in the way of Jesus.

I love how author Larry Crabb puts it in his book, "The Safest Place on Earth," ["The difference between spiritual and unspiritual community is not whether conflict exists, but is rather in our attitude toward it and our approach to handling it. When conflict is seen as an opportunity to draw more fully on spiritual resources, we have the makings of spiritual community. \(pg.40\)"](#)

In other words, we're going to have conflict, so it's how we handle conflict that determines the level of our spiritual maturity! What makes or breaks relationships, and what makes or breaks churches, is **how** we handle conflict. We must learn how to walk in love when dealing with conflict. This involves three things, as laid out in our passage from Matthew chapter 18, as well as it's surrounding context.

***We must approach conflicts with love and humility.***

At the beginning of Matthew 18, Jesus sets the stage for His teaching on resolving conflict by saying (in verses 3&4) that we're to become like little children. Now look, we've all seen Christians act like little children when it comes to getting their way, but that's not what Jesus is talking about. Verse 4 is the key: We are to humble ourselves like a little child.

And Jeremy spoke on this last week; his entire message was on the importance of humility. And here in Matthew 18 humility becomes the overarching attitude we must have as we approach conflict. To be humble means to bring low, to put someone else's interests above our own.

And that's the opposite of what we typically want to do in conflict. Typically when we're in conflict we try to elevate ourselves, justify ourselves, prove that we're right. But if that's how we approach a conflict, the conflict will only grow.

When we're dealing with conflict with another person, the goal **MUST** be reconciliation, not simply to justify our position or the fact that we might be right. In other words, our hope is to mend the relationship, not to choose sides and declare a winner. **THIS** is the key to handling conflict in the way Jesus commands us, love and humility must be the overarching attitudes we approach conflict with.

So, according to this passage, there **will be** conflict in the church, and the broader context of the passage reminds us that we must search our hearts **before** we ever deal with a conflict. We must ask ourselves, "**Am I walking in and motivated by love? Am I seeking to restore this relationship and not just get what I want?**" If not, get your heart right first, and then deal with the problem at hand.

***We must have the right approach.***

And it's after that, and only after that, Jesus gives us a very simple plan or approach on how to handle conflict.

And what we see here in this passage from Matthew 18 is that we typically make things so complicated when it comes to handling conflict, but Jesus makes it SIMPLE! We would save ourselves so much heartache if we would simply FOLLOW THESE DIRECTIONS! I think the world would also have a much higher view of the church and of Jesus if we simply followed this approach Jesus gives to conflict. So listen up, these are critical!

STEP #1 in handling conflict, after we've ensured our heart is set on restoration, and not just winning an argument, step #1, according to Matthew 18:15, is to start with **A private conversation.**

**15...go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back.**

This is where we most often miss it right off the bat! Jesus say's when we are in conflict, we are to first go directly to the person who has sinned against you!

This means that when conflict arises between us and someone, we don't first go to our friends, we don't even go to our home group leader as our pastor, but rather, when we're in conflict, the Bible says we're to first go to the person with whom there's a problem.

It's happened to me a few times where folks come up to me with a problem about another person, and once I realize what they are going to ask, I typically stop them, cut them off, and ask them. "Have you addressed this with that person yet, have you communicated this frustration or issue clearly with them yet?" If not, encourage them to do so first. That's where Jesus said to start.

I had a buddy in the church, in this church, who came to me once with a real problem with his neighbor, a real problem. Our church member had a valid concern, and so he asked me if he should go to the cops or to the homeowner association first.

My response was “**have you gone to the neighbor yet?**” And my friend said “**no way!**” And as our conversation went on, he eventually became convicted that, while it would be harder to do, that Biblically he had to go to his neighbor first.

And when he went to talk to the neighbor that had truly wronged him, the neighbor opened up with some struggles, the neighbor was vulnerable, and apologized...they had a truly deep conversation.

You see, when my buddy had the goal of restoration, and not just winning an argument or handing out punishment, and when my buddy operated according to this passage by going to the other person privately first, so much heartache and legal ramifications were saved,...

So, if you're planning to come to me about a conflict with another person, let me save you some time. Talk to the person about the problem first. I can't help you if you're not willing to address the issue first 1-on-1, in private, as the scripture states here in Matthew 18.

So, here are some guidelines for when we need to have a private conversation.

Start soon. Don't put off the conflict for weeks or months in the hopes that it will go away. It won't. It will only get worse as the anger and bitterness takes root in your soul. That's why in Ephesians 4:26 it says “**do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.**”

Conflict tends to get blown out of proportion the longer it sits unaddressed. Remember what Jesus said about leaving your gift at the altar, how resolving conflict with a brother is more important than bringing an offering to God.

The reason resolving conflict quickly is so important is because it can cause so much damage the longer it goes untreated. If we had a broken leg, we'd want the injury repaired as soon as possible? The longer you wait to repair a broken leg the harder it is to have full healing. The same is true with conflict, the longer we wait the harder it is to repair.

Also, this private 1-on-1 meeting should be face to face if at all possible.

Jesus said, “**go privately and point out the offense.**” Go privately, that means strive to be with the person face to face. I think Jesus would've probably added in today's culture, No e-mail. No letter or note as the first step. And for Pete's sake don't send a text message....

Go face to face, at a minimum pick up the phone. When we first handle conflict 1-on-1, in a quick and face-to-face manner, we affirm the relationship. We let the person know that we're seeking to resolve the conflict, not to assign blame.

Other last thing or tip, and that is that we must get the facts first, listen! Let the other person to respond, and truly listen to them. When the other person is responding, keep your ears open and mouth shut. Don't interrupt! Let them finish. James 1:19 says “**You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.**”

Folks, Most conflicts can be resolved in this first stage laid out in Matthew 18, the 1-on-1 stage, if we simply have the courage, and if we care enough about another person, to take that first step. There's going to be conflict, especially in this church where people are more open with their junk,... and the key to handling conflict is that the first step is to go 1-on-1 with your brother, seeking to repair the relationship, not just win an argument.

But what if that doesn't work, what if the other person doesn't want to discuss it or doesn't want to make the relationship right? Well, then Jesus teaches us that we're to go to the next step. Which is: Step #2: Take Witnesses.

**16 But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses.**

These witnesses are brought into the conflict for the same reason; to bring reconciliation and clarity.. I've gone through this step a few times, and honestly, most of the time the extra one to two folks help me see that I was in the wrong as well... they help provide amazing clarity.

What we're talking about here is a mediator. A neutral person. Someone who can help keep emotions in check and help clarify the issues when the 1-on-1 approach didn't work. And the people who are brought into the process at this point need to be wise, mature, and have the same goal of repairing relationships, not simply condemning someone or assigning blame.

And the few times I've had to go to this step in my Christian walk, it's always brought resolution. But the scripture does go on to say that at times, rarely, that this step won't bring resolution. And for those few times, then the next step comes into the picture. And the third step is fairly drastic. Step #3 is Take it to the church. **17 If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church.**

Notice it does not specifically say, "**Make an announcement from the pulpit on Sunday morning... or in our case from the music stand**" Now, in some extreme cases that may be necessary, especially if there is continual, confirmed, un-confessed sin. Or if it were something that just had to be addressed from up front,... for example if I, as the pastor, had to be dismissed for some reason, the entire church would need to hear why from up here....

But that's not the typical way this passage should be interpreted. It's not about airing out the dirty laundry in front of the entire church body. Again, the goal is repentance, and repairing relationships, not judging or bringing condemnation.

1 Corinthians 6:1-8 talks about gathering some wise men from the church for this type of process. This is where the elders and the leaders and the wise folks from the broader church should get involved.

Again, the goal is reconciliation. And there are times when bringing something in front of the church, be it the elders, or in extreme cases the entire church, is needed, but the context must always be a heart for reconciliation, not condemnation.

Now, What if that does not work either? Some conflicts simply will not be resolved, no matter how hard we try or how many steps we take. Then step four is to break off the relationship. Verse 17 continues **Then if he or she won't accept the church's decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector.**

If you cannot reach agreement, or even agree to disagree, then separation is called for. Jesus said to treat them as a pagan or tax collector. Does that mean treat them like scoundrels or like dirt?

No. Jesus loved pagans and corrupt tax collectors. He walked in love with them; He pursued them in the hope of winning them over... But they also didn't experience the intimate family relationship of the church.

This reminds me of Romans 12:18 where the Bible states. **“Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.”** ... “all that you can” means that you only can do your part... you can't force others to always “live at peace” with us.

So, if you have someone who's refused to be reconciled to you, ask yourself these questions,

“Do I long to be reconciled?”

“Do I still act in love with this person?”

If so, then you're doing your part. It is now up to the other person. But honestly, we usually have some true heart work needed for ourselves before we can fully say that we're doing all that we can to live in peace with everyone.

***Positive impact conflict can have***

So, a fairly simple and direct way to handle conflict in the church laid out here in Matthew 18. And folks, if we were to simply live this passage out in reality, the result will be amazing! Look how the scripture fleshes out the impact if we handle conflict in this manner.

18 "I tell you the truth, whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.

19 "I also tell you this: If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. 20 For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them."

If we truly dive into the relationships in the church, and persevere through the hard times and handle conflict in a biblical manner, the results on the other side can be powerful.

Conflict that is handled in a godly manner, according to verse 19, can lead to agreement, lead to answered prayers, even lead to a special presence of the Lord here on earth because of the unified nature of the church....

## **You (application)**

That's awesome! That's a big deal. That's a huge deal. So we have to take a passage like this to heart if we're truly going to be **a community founded upon Jesus**. We have to make this a reality in terms of how we handle conflict.

So folks, I want to ask you to seriously consider what God might be directing you towards right now. Maybe the Spirit is convicting you to stop gossiping about someone and start talking to them, privately, 1-on-1.

Maybe you need to go quickly and have a conversation with someone this week, stop putting off that hard conversation.

Some of you might be in the midst of conflict right now, be it a marriage or a parenting relationship or friendship that has hit a wall, and maybe you need to bring someone in to help you flesh through the conflict.

And all of us need to commit to this type of conflict resolution, for the sake of each other and for the sake of the church. A couple of months ago Ryan talked about our church covenant, about what it means to be a "member" at Riverside. And I'm not going to rehash that, but this stuff on conflict, and how we handle it, is key if you're going to be part of this church.

We say things in our covenant like **"I will protect personal relationships and church unity by a commitment to love unconditionally, work through conflict, and submit to leaders.**

The covenant also says that, as leaders in this church, **We will protect personal relationships and church unity by a commitment to love unconditionally, work through conflict, and serve humbly.**

So folks, being part of this church, if Riverside is going to be your church home, it means that you and I must be committed to handling conflict in a Biblical manner.

## **Conclusion/Communion**

Folks, conflict will come, even in the church... especially in this church because we're all a bunch of broken messed up folks being remade in the image of Jesus,.... And when conflict does come, we must start by walking in love and humility.

*(pause)*

Right after this teaching in Matthew 18, Peter asks Jesus about forgiving others. And Jesus goes on to that the key to resolving most conflict is forgiveness. He goes on to tell a story that illustrates that we've been forgiven so much by God, and therefore we must forgive others who wrong us.

Folks, we have a reason to resolve conflict differently than the world, and that reason is Christ. Because we've been forgiven of so much, we must walk humbly and lovingly when in conflict with others.

Christ resolved the conflict between God and man, the conflict caused by our sin, by willingly suffering and giving himself as a sacrifice. He is our example when it comes to conflict,....

So as we continue to sing....