

Conflict

COMMUNION

September 6, 2026

Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵ “If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together. If they listen to you, then you’ve won over your brother or sister. ¹⁶ But if they won’t listen, take with you one or two others so that every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ But if they still won’t pay attention, report it to the church. If they won’t pay attention even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector. ¹⁸ I assure you that whatever you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. And whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them.”

Exodus 12:1-14

¹ The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, ² “This month will be the first month; it will be the first month of the year for you. ³ Tell the whole Israelite community: On the tenth day of this month they must take a lamb for each household, a lamb per house. ⁴ If a household is too small for a lamb, it should share one with a neighbor nearby. You should divide the lamb in proportion to the number of people who will be eating it. ⁵ Your lamb should be a flawless year-old male. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶ You should keep close watch over it until the fourteenth day of this month. At twilight on that day, the whole assembled Israelite community should slaughter their lambs. ⁷ They should take some of the blood and smear it on the two doorposts and on the beam over the door of the houses in which they are eating. ⁸ That same night they should eat the meat roasted over the fire. They should eat it along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

⁹ Don't eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over fire with its head, legs, and internal organs. ¹⁰ Don't let any of it remain until morning and burn any of it left over in the morning. ¹¹ This is how you should eat it. You should be dressed, with your sandals on your feet and your walking stick in your hand. You should eat the meal in a hurry. It is the Passover of the Lord. ¹² I'll pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I'll strike down every oldest child in the land of Egypt, both humans and animals. I'll impose judgments on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord. ¹³ The blood will be your sign on the houses where you live. Whenever I see the blood, I'll pass over you. No plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. ¹⁴ This day will be a day of remembering for you. You will observe it as a festival to the Lord. You will observe it in every generation as a regulation for all time.



Just seeing that word “Conflict” up on that big screen, how does it make you feel? What were your first thoughts when you glanced at the bulletin and saw that as the title of the message? Most of us do not like being involved in a conflict and the majority of us probably do not even like thinking about the idea of being in conflict. As a general rule, I think most of us avoid conflict. Being in a conflict feels like a threat to our sense of peace, community, and sometimes even to our sense of self. Maybe you have read a devotional or heard a sermon before about how to follow Jesus’ advice for handling conflict in Matthew 18. But have you ever seen leaders or people in the church use these steps to resolve a conflict?

To follow these three steps when involved in a conflict, well, it is not easy. To follow these three steps requires us to use skills that are uncomfortable to practice. Yet this is the conflict resolution guidance that we receive from Jesus. I believe that it is solid guidance. Again, maybe not easy to follow, but solid.

Jesus invites us to have the courage to not triangulate. This is a lesser skill that we've all used. Step one is a personal conversation with the person who has hurt us. This conversation should be direct and honest. If the next step is needed, this involves being persistent and transparent. It involves seeking wise counsel from a third party. And if the next step is needed, Jesus offers solid guidance on what to do next. We'll get to that step in a few minutes. For now, as we begin, let us start with a centering prayer. Please pray with me...

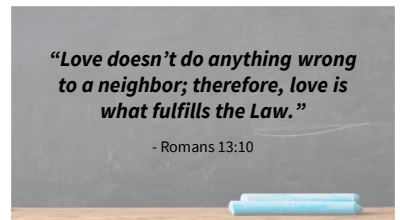
God of all Creation, you gather us here in your Spirit as the body of Christ. You call us to grow in love and faith. Open our ears to hear your Word. Open our eyes to see the path you call us to. Open our hearts to be changed and to grow, to blossom and to bear fruit, all in the name of Christ. Speak, Holy One, for we are listening. And now, O God, I ask that you would bless the words of my mouth and that the meditation of all of our hearts would be pleasing in your sight. You are our rock and our redeemer, our Christ and our king. Amen.

As a kid growing up, we had what my family called "church clothes." Anyone else have that growing up? I think it still is a thing amongst some in our community of faith. In my family, I can recall having three distinct layers of clothing options. At the top of the hierarchy were my "church clothes." Next on the ladder were what we called "school clothes." Holding a place at the bottom of the hierarchy were "play clothes." And in truth, there were some instances when, for example, school clothes became play clothes. If you forgot to change clothes when you got home from school and went right to playing football in the yard, well, sometimes school clothes were no longer school clothes.

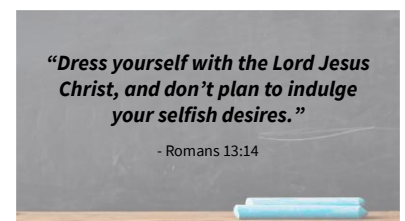
But church clothes were pretty much reserved for Sunday morning. Yes, we'd occasionally have to wear our church clothes to a funeral or wedding or some other special event.

In these cases, though, church clothes still functioned the same way. You see, church clothes were more than just clothes. As a child, I learned fairly early on that when Mom or Dad asked me to put on my church clothes, they were asking for something more than just what I put on my body. In this sense, “church clothes” were worn a certain way. Maybe we could call this putting on our “church attitude.” Certain behaviors were expected when one put on your church clothes. And certain *other* behaviors were definitely frowned upon.

Paul speaks of this concept in our Epistle reading this week. In Romans 13:8-14, Paul first reminds us of our obligation to love one another. In verse 10 Paul writes, *“Love doesn’t do anything wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is what fulfills the Law.”* In an ideal world, yes, this would be true. But if that was our world, we would not be talking about how to deal well with conflict today! Even so, this is the goal: to love one another so well that there is an absence of conflict in the community of faith. Let’s keep that idea as our goal.



Moving into verses 11-14, Paul encourages us to get rid of those actions that *“belong to the darkness”* and to instead *“behave appropriately.”* Connecting into the idea of putting on our “church clothes,” Paul adds this in verse 14: *“Dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don’t plan to indulge your selfish desires.”* To dress yourself in Jesus - that would be putting on our church clothes along with our church attitude!!

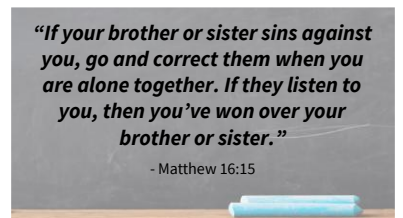


As we turn to Matthew, we begin by acknowledging that Jesus did not encourage his followers to just “dress” for church on Sundays – or for the Sabbath, in his time and culture. We have a tendency to do this – to compartmentalize. This is a frequent topic at youth group. Youth, for example, behave a certain way at youth group or in church or at confirmation.

But then at school or in the locker room or when they are out with their friends on a Friday night, they behave in very different ways. Using our analogy for today, in these situations they put on the clothes of the world. Now, do not be misled by my example. This is a struggle that we all face as we learn and grow in our faith. As we work through this process of becoming who God calls us to be – all the time, not just some of the time – we sense the inner conflict that rages between the ways of God and the ways of world within our hearts, minds, and souls. Early in our faith walk, I think we try and compartmentalize our faith because this lessens these feelings of conflict within our hearts, minds, and souls.



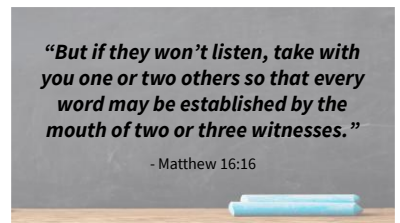
In a perfect world, we would put on our church clothes every day and we would love, love, love our neighbors. Sadly, this is not our everyday reality. This is why Jesus addresses the inevitable conflict that can be found even in the church. As we turn to Matthew 16, starting in verse 15, Jesus says, *“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together. If they listen to you, then you’ve won over your brother or sister.”* This is step one is Jesus’ model of reconciliation.



This step is direct and it is personal. This step invites us to be honest with one another, to share when another has hurt us with their words or actions or with their silence or inaction. That is why we do not triangulate, talking behind the other’s back in order to get someone else on our side. This step also requires both vulnerability and transparency. We need to be vulnerable enough to share that we have been hurt and we need to be transparent enough to share our genuine emotions surrounding the hurt. To go to another in this way involves risk. They could react poorly or they could try and turn the tables on us. They could be upset that we created the potential for conflict and might react accordingly. Or they could not care.

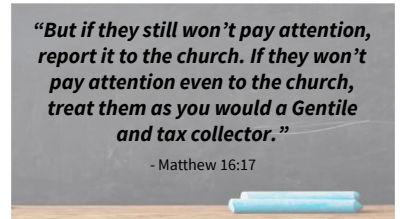
From my experience, though, when I have had the courage to go to someone when they have hurt me, this often resolves the conflict. Another benefit of practicing this step of reconciliation is that we are more likely to be gracious and receptive when we are on the receiving end of this kind of conversation. Make no mistake, as we are sinners too, at times we will hurt our fellow believers and will experience someone coming to us as the one who caused the hurt.

As I alluded to just a moment ago, there will be times when a direct, honest, one-on-one conversation does not resolve the conflict. In these cases, we are to turn to step two of Jesus' reconciliation plan. In verse 16, Jesus tells us, *"But if they won't listen, take with you one or two others so that every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses."* Jesus is *NOT* telling us to share all about our hurt and to present our side of the case and then to go back to the one who caused hurt with these witnesses already on our side. No, this second step is about listening. It is not about bringing someone to bolster your side or to intimidate the other with numbers.



If you are in conflict with someone who won't listen, the witnesses that you engage in the conversation are to help the other hear and possibly to help you hear as well. A third party stands outside the conflict and often serves as a valuable resource in resolving the conflict. In the church we are in the business of putting things together, of healing the breaches between people, and of overcoming what keeps us apart. This step of working together to resolve conflict is about rebuilding community and connection and belonging. Even though these things – community, connection, and belonging – are to be the defining characteristics of the community of faith, at times someone refuses to be a part of reconciliation. Because of this reality, Jesus offers us a third step.

In verse 17 he offers this guidance: *“But if they still won’t pay attention, report it to the church. If they won’t pay attention even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector.”*



Maybe you’ve heard or read this verse to be permission to write that person off or to kick them out of the church. If so, a couple of reminders. How did Jesus treat the tax collectors? Well, he invited one to be on his team and he called one down out of a tree so that he could share a meal together. And how did Jesus treat the Gentiles? He preached to them, he traveled to their lands, he invited them into his presence, and he even elevated them in a few of his parables.

If we are to treat those who hurt us as Jesus treated the tax collectors and Gentiles, then we will treat them with love and we will continue to invite them back into relationship. As people of Christ, we should always be trying to heal what is broken. As followers of Jesus, we must continue to reach out. We must seek to rebuild that damaged relationship. When we look at Jesus’ example in the gospels, those outside of community were always encouraged and invited in. At times they were challenged, yes, but always with love and gentleness. When there was conflict in Jesus’ ministry, he would never have said, *“Get behind me Satan”* to a Pharisee or to Pilate or to the woman at the well.

Jesus closes this passage by reminding us of the long-term consequences of our actions. When he reminds us that what we fasten or loosen on earth will be fastened or loosened in heaven, he is saying that our judgments and conflicts, our forgiveness and healing, they have eternal consequences. The resentments or forgiveness that we carry around in our hearts will be there forever. On this journey, we soon learn that our faith and joy and contentment in this life are all about the quality of our relationships, about the love we share with one another. With that understanding, Jesus would advise us all to be people of forgiveness.



In our Exodus 12 passage we find the story of Passover. Please turn there with me now as we further explore the idea of conflict resolution. Up to this point in Exodus, there has been a whole lot of conflict. Moses has brought nine plagues upon Egypt. Pharaoh has pondered letting the Israelites go but has had his heart hardened by God again and again. This all sets the stage for the final plague – the death of the firstborn.

At the beginning of chapter 12, God resets the calendar so that this day of remembrance will fall at the beginning of each new year. After giving instructions about the lamb and the food and about how to eat it, God proclaims that this will be a day that all of Israel “*will observe it in every generation as a regulation for all time.*” Every year, Israel will remember this mighty act of salvation. When we are dealing with conflict, we too should remember what Israel always remembers in their Passover celebrations: Our ultimate protection comes not from our power but from God. Through this experience, Israel learned that they did not have the power of life and death. That belongs to God alone.

Each year, as they gather around the table with the sacrificial lamb in the center, the people of God were reminded of their need for God’s love and power. Like the Israelites on the night of that first Passover, we too need to remember that as we face the conflicts in our world and in our lives – the ones we can reconcile and the ones that we cannot reconcile – that God is with us. God calls us to come together and to remember, to lean not on our own devices or power, but to find refuge in our God who calls, protects, and guides.

In the world in which we live, it is good to be reminded that conflict is not to be resolved through the use of power over or by any other means of violence. This is not the way of faith.

In the gospel, we were reminded that we are not called to cast out, to beat down, or to oppress those that we are in conflict with. Therefore, we cannot choose to see the other as unworthy of our love or attention. We are called by Christ, the one who redeems our brokenness, to lead with love, to stand against those who seek to use power over others, and to stand against claims that place one group, one class, one race, or one nation above others.

The Passover meal is a reminder of the danger of abusing power over others and of the rescue that comes not from force or violence but from trust in the redemptive power of God. In this story, God does for God's people what they are unable to do for themselves. God freed Israel from Pharaoh so that they can worship and serve God. The purpose of the story then and now was and is to shape the contemporary faith community to be one that trusts in God.

My friends, to trust in the Lord our God, we need to make the intentional choice to take off the clothes of this world – the desire for power and control and wealth and possessions and status and popularity. And while doing so, we also need to make the intentional choice to put on our “church clothes,” so to speak, so that we can live and be people of love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation. May it be so for you and for me. Alleluia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. Do you have a conflict that needs resolved? Have the courage and trust in God to follow the conflict resolution steps that Jesus gives in Matthew 16!
- 2) *Pray*. Do you struggle to trust in God’s power and not your own? Center on an area or situation where this struggle is real. Spend some time in prayer this week!
- 3) *Study*. Read Romans 13:8-14. How might these words of Paul help us battle our tendency to compartmentalize our faith?