

9.6.26 Sermon on Matthew 18:15-20

Back when I was going through the discernment process to become a pastor, one of the things that we are required to do is go through a psychological evaluation. This has a couple of components. One is an extensive written test. The other is sitting down with a psychologist who has analyzed that test. I can remember one of the big takeaways from my sit-down: I am a conflict-avoidant person! Thankfully, as one who had already spent years in therapy by that point, this was not news to me. This is also probably not news to those of you who know me. The people-pleaser in me always has to fight the temptation to believe that if I can avoid conflict, that means it doesn't exist. It takes a lot of emotional energy for me to confront and deal with conflict. Maybe you are like me. Or maybe you are someone who has never had a problem facing conflict head-on when it comes.

Today, we come to a passage that gets into the nitty-gritty of the Christian life. So often we read passages that leave us with big, sweeping ideals and truths. But here, we get into the mess of what it means to live in community. Christian community is defined not by the absence of conflict – though wouldn't that be nice! – but by how faithfully we practice truth-telling, accountability, boundaries, forgiveness, and restoration when conflict inevitably comes.

We often carry an idealized version of Christian community in our heads: one where everyone loves everyone, everyone gets along, no one gets angry or hurts anyone, and even when there is disagreement, everyone responds with grace and maturity. It sounds wonderful! But it also sounds like a church that has never existed. Churches are made up of human beings, and human beings misunderstand, disappoint, gossip, become defensive, misuse power, and sometimes genuinely hurt one another. The question isn't whether conflict will happen. It will. The question is what we will do when it does. We're only a few minutes in and already my conflict-avoidant self is getting antsy.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood this tension between the community we imagine and the community God actually gives us. We enter community with expectations about what Christians should be like and what church should feel like – and then we meet actual Christians. They annoy us, disappoint us, disagree with us, and hurt us. And, of course, each of us are one of those actual Christians too. Bonhoeffer warned in *Life Together*, "Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community." Part of learning to love the real community we have been given is learning to navigate conflict faithfully and with love.

And so, in Matthew 18, Jesus gives us a pattern for handling conflict when it comes. The first thing we are to do? Go to the person. That sounds simple, but it can be incredibly difficult. We would often rather tell our spouse, our best friend, three people "just so they know," or ask, "Have you noticed this too?" Eventually everyone hears about the problem except the person we are upset with!

There are important exceptions. If the harm is abusive, violent, threatening, or dangerous to anyone's well-being, absolutely do not go alone to that person. Tell someone you trust and seek help.

But in ordinary conflict, Jesus says to go directly to the person – not to humiliate them, punish them, or prove you're right, but because the relationship matters enough to tell the truth. Talking about someone lets us control the narrative. Talking to someone means they might explain something we didn't know. We

might discover there's been a misunderstanding. They might apologize. Or maybe we'll discover that we contributed to the conflict too. Christian accountability requires honesty, courage, and humility.

This first conversation is meant to be private. If something can be repaired quietly between two people, it should be. Accountability is not about humiliation, it is about repair. What happened? Who was harmed? What needs to change? How do we prevent the harm from happening again?

The church sometimes confuses grace with the absence of accountability. We hear, "Just forgive," or "Let's move on." But grace does not require pretending nothing happened. Forgiveness does not mean denying harm, eliminating consequences, or simply returning to how things were. Sometimes we have to say, "This happened. It caused harm. It cannot continue." That is accountability.

When a one-on-one conversation doesn't bring resolution, Jesus says to bring in a couple more people – not to recruit allies, but to help discern a path forward. Another person can help clarify what happened, identify misunderstandings, de-escalate the situation, and help both sides communicate.

Jesus continues, "If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." Some problems cannot remain private. Some behavior affects the whole community, particularly when power is involved. Again, Matthew 18 should never be weaponized against victims. Someone experiencing abuse, harassment, threats, exploitation, sexual misconduct, or violence should never be told, "Jesus says you have to confront that person privately first." Sometimes accountability requires involving others immediately.

Sometimes love also requires boundaries. Accountability might mean removing someone from leadership, restricting participation, requiring changed behavior, or protecting vulnerable people. Consequences are not the opposite of grace. They can interrupt destructive behavior, protect others, and create space for genuine repentance. Grace is not permission to continue hurting people.

Then Jesus says that if someone still refuses to listen, they should be treated "as a Gentile and a tax collector." That might sound like a simple exclusion until we remember how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors. He ate with tax collectors, healed Gentiles, welcomed outsiders, and continued extending grace. The relationship might have to change. Trust might be broken and boundaries may be necessary. But the person does not cease to be someone loved by God. Accountability without grace can become punishment; grace without accountability can become permission. Christian community needs both grace and accountability together.

Jesus then says, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." In essence, he is saying what a community permits has broader ramifications. What a community permits matters. What it excuses matters. What it confronts matters. If cruelty is ignored, or racism dismissed as humor, if misogyny excused because "that's just how he is," or powerful people are protected at the expense of vulnerable people, then we are teaching something about who matters.

Sometimes accountability is how a community says, "This is who we are going to be." We will be a community where people matter more than reputations, or truth matters more than avoiding awkwardness. Grace does not mean enabling harm, and leadership does not exempt anyone from

accountability. Repentance means more than saying, “I’m sorry.” It also has to mean being willing to change.

And there are times when the community itself needs accountability. Churches can develop unhealthy cultures, protecting powerful people while silencing vulnerable ones, or becoming so comfortable with political and cultural power that we no longer recognize how much it has shaped us.

While there are many examples around us today (just look at the SBC sex abuse scandals for one), another significant example of the church community itself needing to be held accountable comes from Germany in the 1930s. As Hitler gained power, large portions of German Protestant Christianity accommodated themselves to his regime. The “German Christians” movement aligned Christianity with Nazi ideology and nationalism. The problem wasn’t just a few individual Christians behaving badly. The church itself was failing to hold itself accountable.

Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, and others associated with the Confessing Church insisted that the church had to remember who its Lord actually was. That resistance produced the Barmen Declaration in 1934. At its heart was a basic Christian claim: Jesus Christ is Lord. And if Jesus Christ was Lord, the Hitler was not. Neither was the nation, political ideology, or the white race. The church could not absorb the ideology of the surrounding culture and claim it as Christianity. But even that resistance had limitations. Bonhoeffer became frustrated that many Christians who resisted government interference with the church were reluctant to go far enough in defending Jewish people being persecuted. They recognized the problem when the government threatened the church, but struggled to recognize their responsibility when it threatened someone else. Bonhoeffer pushed toward the harder question: “Who is being harmed, and what responsibility do we have toward them?”

That question still matters. Churches can be very good at examining individual behavior while refusing to examine institutional behavior. Christian accountability must also ask: “Who has power? Who is being ignored? Who is being protected? Who is being harmed? What have we normalized? What are we afraid to confront because it might cost us comfort, influence, members, money, or reputation?”

Sometimes faithfulness means sitting across from another person and saying, “You hurt me,” But sometimes it can also mean saying to an entire institution, “We are hurting people, we have gotten this wrong, and we need to repent.” Repentance is not merely for individuals. Communities can also confess. Churches can change direction. And repentance means more than apologizing; it means repairing what can be repaired and changing the practices that caused the harm.

Perhaps one of the deepest forms of Christian accountability is not merely asking, “What did that person do wrong?” but “What have we gotten wrong together?” Sometimes the most faithful thing Christians can do for the church they love is love it enough to tell it the truth.

Churches often want peace. I, and my conflict-avoidant self, want peace. But sometimes what we call peace is just silence. If there is no conflict, it can be because people have genuinely reconciled, or it can be because everyone has learned that speaking up is dangerous. A church might look peaceful because the people who were hurt stopped talking, or eventually left. Silence is not always peace.

Jesus offers something better: tell the truth, listen, seek repair, establish boundaries when necessary, and leave room for repentance and restoration. Bonhoeffer reminds us that we aren't called to love some imaginary perfect church but the actual people God has given us. So perhaps the mark of a healthy church isn't, "We never have conflict," but "We know how to have conflict faithfully."

And then Jesus says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." We often quote this when attendance is low, but look at the context. Jesus is talking about conflict, accountability, discernment, and reconciliation. And Jesus says, "I am there." Christ is present when someone says, "You hurt me," and another has the humility to say, "You're right."

Christian community isn't different because we never hurt or fail one another. It is different because of what we are called to do afterward: tell the truth, listen, repent, forgive, repair what can be repaired. And we keep making room for grace.

This is the community God has actually given us, not an imaginary community, not a conflict-free community, but this community, these imperfect people, including ourselves. And right here, in the messy and sometimes beautiful work of learning how to live together, Jesus promises: "I am there among you." Amen.