

“Come, Follow me!”
Feeling Wronged

Passages: Galatians 2:11-16
Matthew 18:15-35

It's easy to treat people **well** when they treat you **well**. The real test comes when they treat you **badly**!

Think of a time when you felt you were seriously wronged. Maybe you think someone stole something from you; perhaps you thought they betrayed you or turned others against you; maybe you felt they broke an agreement or cheated on you; perhaps you felt that they spoke abusively to you.

In all these situations, the natural response is to get upset or angry. It's also natural to turn away from that person by breaking off your relationship with them! Worse still, there can be a strong tendency to speak badly about them to others; to tell other people what you think they did to you!

But, are these responses really the *wisest* choices we have? Is it *wise* to run away from others? Is it *wise* to gossip and spread your accusations and blame, even when you're confident that your side of the story is the truth?

As we will see in today's passage, *feeling wronged* by someone is no excuse for discarding a relationship with them.

Let's pray.

In today's passage, Jesus speaks with great wisdom on this issue of *feeling wronged*...as if he knew a thing or two about the subject! Think about it-- at this stage in His ministry, He must have continually felt that there were people out to get Him. People were falsely accusing Him of all sorts of wrongdoing; some even wanted to kill Him!

And so, it would have been easy for Jesus to say, *“If someone sins against you, just move on! Don't let it bother you!”* But that's not His advice. Instead, He tells His disciples, *“If someone sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.”*

Instead of **moving away** from the person who has wronged you, Jesus tells us to **move towards** that person. Why? There are three reasons:

1. **You may actually be wrong!** You may have totally misread the situation! By moving towards the other person, you allow an opportunity for *your own assumptions* to be disproved. This is very important, for the fact is that, every time we believe our own assumptions about another person *without checking* whether they are true or not, it is possible that we have totally misread the situation! It is also likely that we will pass our false assumptions on to others, thus breaking the ninth commandment: **“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour!”** In doing so, we only escalate confusion and conflict.
2. **Both of you may be wrong!** That is, both of you may have played some part in the breakdown of the relationship. By moving towards the other person in the above manner, you allow for dialogue to work out what happened and where you both went wrong in your assumptions.
3. **Even if you’re right** (and the other person has wronged you), by moving towards the other person, you open up an opportunity for that person to repent and ask for forgiveness. Sometimes, the culpability lies so heavily upon that person that they are *frozen*-- they feel unable to come to you and ask forgiveness. The damage they’ve caused is so deep, they feel they could never be forgiven! That’s why, when you (the wronged party) moves towards the person who has wronged you, it opens up a new avenue for them to say they’re sorry!

It’s in that context that, in verse 15, Jesus concludes: **“If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”** There’s reconciliation! Isn’t this what Paul did with Peter in Galatians 2?

More importantly, isn’t this exactly what God does with us? We, the sinner...the guilty party; we who have been the sole cause of any breakdown in the relationship with God; we can easily feel unworthy to come to God. But, amazingly, in Jesus Christ, **God comes to us!** The shepherd comes to find His lost sheep! In most circumstances, it is His openness towards us that enables us to repent and to ask for His forgiveness! His grace towards us is what wins us over!

Indeed, it's out of this *dynamic movement of God's grace towards us* (initiated in Jesus Christ) that Jesus can now turn around and instruct His disciples **to be instruments of that same grace** by *graciously moving towards other fallen human beings!* **We**, who have been so graciously reconciled to God, **are now called to be agents of God's gracious reconciliation.** (Paul says something very similar in 2 Corinthians 5:19. ***"God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation."***)

Let's stop at this point and do a little exercise:

1. Consider just one of your relationships (at home, church, work; a close friend, a neighbour, a room-mate, a colleague) in which there is some unresolved tension or hurt...and which you have pulled away instead of moving towards that person.
2. Write down that person's initials.
3. Ask yourself: *Is there any assumption that I am making about this person?* (e.g. I assumed that you would take out the garbage; I assumed that you would finish the paperwork by today; I assumed that we would engage in deeper conversation; I assumed that you would visit me...) Write down **your assumption** next to that person's initials.
4. Ask yourself, "Have I been clear with this person about my assumptions? Have I really laid out the things that I am expecting from this relationship?"
5. Now, make a plan to go to that person. Will it be this week? Will it be by phone? Will I send a letter?
6. Plan to ask them one simple question: *"Here are my assumptions-- Are they correct?"*
7. The point of the exercise is to make the first move to help clear the air and bring reconciliation.

Does all that sound far too difficult to you? What I find really amazing in today's passage is just how *tenacious* we are called to be in our efforts at reconciliation. We are not to give up seeking out the lost sheep!

Verse 16—***But if he will not listen, take one or two others along...***

Verse 17—***If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church...***

Of course, Jesus' point, here, is **not** than we *force* some form of admission of guilt out of the person, but that, at all costs, we clear the air between us. We

must do all we can do to foster reconciliation...because reconciliation lies at the very heart of the Gospel.

As L. Gregory Jones says in his book, *Embodying Forgiveness*,
In the face of sin and evil, God's love moves toward reconciliation by means of forgiveness. God's forgiveness aims at healing people's lives and re-creating communion ...with God, with one another, and with the whole of creation. This forgiveness is costly, since it involves acknowledging and experiencing the painful truth of human sin and evil at its worst.

This is where the next few verses about *binding and losing* fit in. (Read vv 18-20).

¹⁸ "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be^[e] bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be^[f] loosed in heaven.

What does Jesus mean by this? According to Gregory Jones, these terms are derived from Rabbinic usage where **"to bind"** means *"to forbid or withhold"* and **"to loose"** means *"to permit or set free"*. In the case of two people who refuse to engage in dialogue, they are *binding* that relationship...*forbidding* it to be renewed-- they are essentially condemning it to death! It is for this reason that they are to be excluded from the community of Jesus' disciples (**"Treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector!"**, says Jesus), because the Christian community is a place of life! Those, on the other hand, who agree to engage in a genuine dialogue about their relationship and search for a way to renew it, their humble attitude loosens, or *"sets the relationship free"*, to experience new dimensions of depth and insight in the midst of God's forgiven people!

Jones concludes:

"This practice of binding and loosing describes communities where practices of... forgiveness are central to their ongoing life; where the gospel of God's reconciliation shapes their struggle to live with one another as reconciled and reconciling people...As they do so, the practice of Christian community becomes a sign of redemption in the world."

Clearly, what is of utmost importance to Jesus is the **building of a community of reconciliation; one which serves as a sign of redemption to the world!**

Indeed, this is what drives the whole passage forward, as Jesus goes on (in verses 19 and 20) to tell His disciples;

¹⁹ “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

You see, the glorious truth of the Gospel is this: God’s ultimate goal for this world is the restoration of perfect relationships! In other words, He wants to see reconciliation occurring (and spreading) over the earth...and **far more than we do!** That’s why He will not leave us on our own, to struggle in our own strength. Jesus is *Immanuel*-- God’s presence is with us! Not only does Jesus prompt us with an inner desire to be reconciled, but, as we pray for the resolution of our differences, **Jesus is with us!** That’s not just a promise that we will somehow *sense* his presence. It’s a promise that He will work things out in and through us.

If we take this reconciliation seriously, He will cause our prayers for unity to become reality! No matter how difficult and broken the situation may seem, **“...it will be done for them by My Father in heaven!”** (I want you to note that the issue of divorce is immediately raised in chapter 19. Yes, even two people whop are about to divorce can be reconciled when both parties agree to come together and dialogue! **“If two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.”**)

Let me say it again: **Reconciliation is at the heart of the Christian faith.** As God has done with us, so we are called, **first**, to embody a culture of reconciliation in the church and, **then**, to extend the opportunities of reconciliation outward, into the world.

And that’s why today’s passage finishes with Peter’s question about forgiveness which prompts Jesus to tell *the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant*.

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³ “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like...”

We won't re-read the parable, but suffice it to say that *the forgiveness which Jesus advocates*, here, is not simply one which "*papers over the cracks*" of broken relationships through some sort of abstract *absolution of guilt*. Far too many Christians have believed that 'forgiveness' means pretending that everything is all right, or that God requires that we simply let the offender off the hook! Nothing could be further from the truth!

To start with, **forgiveness means nothing unless the real evil that's been done** (aggression, bullying, dishonesty, or immorality) **is confronted**. Indeed, forgiveness can only take place because the offence really did happen, and it did matter!

Secondly, instead of hiding from or ignoring the offender, you (the offended) must be determined *to keep moving towards the offender* until, as far as it depends on you, there is a restoration of your relationship. This requires divine perseverance! But that's what true forgiveness is all about! This is how you set the offender free... free to re-establish a relationship with you.

Indeed, isn't that exactly what the Kingdom of Heaven is like? It's like a King who, although He has a legal right to hold the offender accountable and have him **bound** in prison...out of his sight, instead, he says to the offender, "*I loose you—I forgive you-- I let you go.*" But notice how **this doesn't mean that the king no longer has any expectations of the servant**. In fact, at the end of the parable, we see how much the King had invested in seeing the servant change his ways. That's why the King becomes so angry and disappointed; for instead of becoming a channel for the redemption of other relationships, the servant has merely continued to destroy lives with his selfish behaviour.

"You wicked servant," he said, "I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"

Of course, this is exactly what God does with us! Whenever He forgives us, the Kingdom of Heaven has come to us! New life is a real possibility in the forgiveness of His Son! That's because forgiveness does not simply mean that our debt has been cancelled. More than that, it means that we are **set free...to walk with Him, learn from Him, be changed by Him, and be brought to wholeness and maturity in Him**. And even when we fail Him 70 times 7, by His grace He continues to persevere with us...until (in His gracious, persistent move of reconciliation) **we eventually become reconcilers...**just like Him!

One final quote from Gregory Jones:

*Forgiveness is not so much a word spoken, an action performed, or a feeling felt as it is an embodied way of life in an ever-deepening friendship with the Triune God. As such, ... **forgiveness** ought not simply... be focused on the absolution of guilt; rather, it **ought to be focused on the reconciliation of brokenness, the restoration of communion – with God, with one another, and with the whole of Creation.***

Conclusion:

It's easy to treat people **well** when they treat you **well**. The real test comes when they treat you **badly**!

So, go back to our little exercise—Who has offended you? How have they offended you? And...what have you done about it?

After all, forgiveness and reconciliation are such huge issues in our world today. How often have we seen 2 people, or 2 groups of people, who *feel incredibly wronged* by the other, yet aren't willing to come to the table and work things out?!

On a global scale, the result is suicide bombs and IED's, campaigns of terror, military aggression and political repression. On the local scale, the result is civil upheaval, political stand-offs, feuds between neighbours, bikie gangs, broken marriages and shattered families. In all these scenarios, people feel wronged but, for whatever reason, they refuse to approach each other in a humble desire for reconciliation.

And that's why Jesus' advice on forgiveness in today's passage is really **the only solution** to the problem of the world's broken relationships. In Him, a true movement of reconciliation has begun in which the normal reaction to **pull away from the offender** is replaced by **a movement towards the offender...** to bring healing to our broken relationships.

This, of course, is the pattern set for us from God. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, continually moved towards the human race, forgiving one abuse after another, even to the point of dying on the cross, in a desire to reconcile us with God! He never gave up moving towards us, forgiving us 70 times 7, in a determined desire to improve, change and restore the human race through the power of reconciliation.

*He is the solution for our broken world! And we are called to be part of His solution! **Let's pray.***