

How To Resolve A Conflict
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Matthew 18:15-20

Living in community with other humans has never been easy. That's because the people who make up communities all have their individual wants and personalities and anxieties. And at times, those wants and personalities and anxieties try to assert themselves over against the needs of the whole group. That's when conflict arises, and sometimes it is a lot more challenging to manage than the average playground squabble. That is why people have continued to establish rules and boundaries to ensure that communities will flourish. The Church has done this since its earliest days. Perhaps the best known example is the Rule of Life created by St. Benedict of Nursia in the 6th century. The Rule continues to be used in monastic communities all over the world to this day. Benedict called his Rule "a school for the Lord's service" whose regulations would be "nothing harsh, nothing burdensome," and intended to facilitate the amendment of faults and to safeguard love.¹ And all of these regulations have the end goal of ensuring Christ is served and that people grow in their relationships with him and with one another.

One of Benedict's inspirations was this passage from Matthew, which is all about setting boundaries and handling conflicts in a constructive way. Coming in the context of a much larger block of material about how to handle life as the *ekklesia*, the gathered community of faith, these five verses are packed tightly. They start with describing the legal procedures to be used in order to resolve conflicts. They move from there to Jesus reminding the disciples that they will be given authority collectively to remove errant

¹ *The Rule of St. Benedict*. <https://saintjohnsabbey.org/rule> [accessed September 3, 2026].

members from the community for a time or permanently; and that God will hear their prayers if they agree about what to ask. Finally, Jesus promises that he will be among them when they gather in his name.

Jesus seems to anticipate what will happen with and to his friends once he's gone. He knows that staying together as the *ekklesia* won't be easy for them, if for no other reason than that they're human, and that, regardless of whether they're part of the Church or not, people can and do struggle to live together peaceably and productively. Those of us who have been around churches for a while know well how serious disagreements can and do happen. They can result from just about anything that's shared in this space, from smaller things like what brand of coffee should be used for coffee hour, to much larger ones like how money is managed. It's fine to have strong opinions about these things; it's expressing those opinions that's really important when it comes to how we can continue to respect them, and the people who hold them.

When conflicts do arise, it's more often than not thanks to a combination of anxiety, fear, and misplaced loyalties (that is, placing loyalty to an individual or small group ahead of loyalty to God). People end up talking *about* others more than they talk *with* others. Once we add in things like those misplaced loyalties, the power dynamics within the community's family system, and varying definitions and degrees of "sin," the end result is a borderline toxic stew. It might seem too hard to find an antidote for that stew, despite Jesus' clear instructions on how to go about it... and so people either walk

away, dig in their heels to fight, or just plain ignore whatever the problem is and hope it'll get better.²

Of course, none of those things actually works. That is why Jesus gives explicit instructions for the disciples to do something else instead. The process he outlines is critically important. It what ensures the integrity of the community as a whole, and insists that we treat one another with respect and compassion. What's more, it creates the space required for the Church to engage in its two primary businesses: looking out for the welfare of the most vulnerable among us, and seeking reconciliation to the greatest extent possible.³

The procedure for resolving conflicts which Jesus teaches the disciples is not entirely new, or unique to Matthew. Parts of it are found in the law codes in the Hebrew Scriptures. They promote addressing conflict head on, rather than letting it fester, and spell out the requirement for multiple witnesses and an investigation before someone can be punished for violations. It's the context of this procedure which gives us some clues as to what new twist Jesus adds to them. In the very beginning of this chapter, Jesus answers a question from the disciples about greatness by pointing out a child in the nearby crowd, and telling them that "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:4, NRSV). From there, he reminds them that harming one such vulnerable person has dire consequences. Following that is Matthew's version of the Parable of the Lost Sheep. In this case, it attempts to address

² Audrey West, "Commentary on Matthew 18:15-20." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23/commentary-on-matthew-1815-20> [accessed September 1, 2026].

³ Andrew McGowan, "As a Gentile and a Tax Collector..." <https://abmcg.substack.com/p/as-a-gentile-and-a-tax-collector> [accessed September 1, 2026].

what the proper response is to a community member who goes astray. And THEN, immediately following the instructions for conflict resolution, Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who wrongs him. Jesus' answer – “not seven times, but 77 times” – indicates that forgiveness must be offered even if it isn't accepted right away.

By placing the procedures for handling disputes in the middle of all this, Matthew is doing two things. One is to remind people that resolving differences of opinion and/or practice doesn't happen in isolation, even when it's done on a small scale. The second is in keeping with Matthew's overall emphasis on Jesus as the fulfillment of what his Jewish audience already knew about how God works in the world. In this case, fulfilling the old-school directives was no longer just a matter of protecting the group; it was how those instructions were now to be carried out from a place of compassion and care for the vulnerable. As one scholar notes, “Matthew is not abandoning the need to confront abuse. Matthew is not espousing the kind of phoney [*sic*] harmony which sweeps abuse under the carpet in the name of Christian peace. But it is clear that he is not prepared to abandon people to being treated like second class citizens: Gentiles and tax collectors, although this is what the tradition had said. If we really rub these conflicting statements together and try to make them fit, we might end up with something like: treat them like Gentiles and tax collectors, people who no longer belong, and then relate to them the way Jesus related to toll collectors and commissioned that we should relate to Gentiles: offer to them a relation of acceptance and forgiveness! Don't write them off!”⁴

⁴ William Loader, “First Thoughts on Passages from Matthew in the lectionary: Pentecost 15.” <https://billloader.com/MtPentecost15Ord23.html> [accessed September 1, 2026]

Don't write them off. That's easier said than done, especially now, where deleting and blocking someone from our "friends" list can be done with a couple of clicks. It's all too easy to say things like "they're crazy!" or "They don't listen to reason or to facts as I think of reason and facts, so they don't deserve my forgiveness, much less my time." (And note, this does NOT apply to situations where maintaining boundaries is necessary for our own safety.) In an era when it seems like we live in a constant state of conflict, and we can hide behind computer screens to avoid interacting with others as we lob insults across cyberspace. Having to handle it head-on is not part of the repertory a whole lot any more, I sometimes wonder if having to work through our disagreements in person may be turning into a lost skill.

Here's the thing: resolving conflicts, and achieving the goal of reconciliation, requires being in actual relationship. That in turn makes it harder to vilify and exclude one another than it might when we're just sending hateful language into the void that is the Internet. My ordaining bishop, the Rt. Rev. Shannon Johnston, took that to heart several years ago when he tried to resolve a long-simmering conflict with a certain parish. That parish was among a group of 11 which had separated themselves from the diocese over the ordination of LGBTQ individuals. The bishop quietly reached out to the leaders of the parish a few years after the dust settled from the lawsuit that the breakaway group had filed. His invitation was simple: There is more in common than not between us; let's talk. Over the next couple of years, Bishop Johnston, a few priests and lay leaders from the diocese, and the leaders of that parish continued their dialog, and encouraged others to engage in it. It wasn't clear exactly how much got resolved before the parish's leaders were directed by their higher-ups to stop, or else. However,

the conversation itself, and the friendships that developed as a result, were the point.

And that's really what Jesus is trying to get at here: stick to the process. Stay in relationship. Be accountable to one another. It makes us ALL stronger.