

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew 18, as we continue our journey through this Gospel together. In his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis creates a fictional correspondence between two demons: Screwtape (the senior demon) and Wormwood (his pupil). Wormwood has been tasked with keeping a certain man from trusting in Jesus. But that doesn't last long. Screwtape's second letter begins with these words: "My Dear Wormwood, I note with grave displeasure that your patient has become a Christian." The rest of the letters contain various strategies for destroying the man's newfound faith. And I want to read you the very first strategy Screwtape recommends.

Again, he writes, "My Dear Wormwood, I note with grave displeasure that your patient has become a Christian..." But then he says, "There is no need to despair; hundreds of these adult converts have been reclaimed after a brief sojourn in the Enemy's camp and are now with us." (To be clear, since this is a demon writing, "the Enemy" is a reference to God.) Then Screwtape says, "One of our greatest allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans."

Screwtape goes on to tell Wormwood that he must help his patient focus on the flaws and imperfections of the church. How he must tempt this new believer to fixate on the weaknesses and the sins that mark the lives of his fellow Christians. "Work hard," Screwtape writes, "on the disappointment... which is certainly coming to the patient during his first few weeks as a churchman."¹

When you become a Christian, it won't be long before other Christians let you down. You may have been drawn to the church because of the faith, hope, and love you saw in God's people. But hang around long enough, and you'll see that while we are a saved people, we are not a perfect people. We have many weaknesses, many imperfections, and sometimes in this family of believers, we sin against one another. The question is, what do you do when a fellow Christian sins against you? Screwtape may be a fictional character, but our enemy is very real, and he loves to sow discord and dissension among God's people. So, he would have you throw up your hands in frustration and walk away... away from that brother or sister, away from the church, and ultimately, away from Christ.

But in our passage this morning, Jesus shows us a better way. He calls us to seek reconciliation and offer forgiveness, essential pursuits for any church family longing to walk in peace and in unity, which is what we want here at The Orchard. So, let's listen and let's learn what to do when other Christians let us down. We'll start with...

1. How to Seek Reconciliation

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus outlines a process for pursuing reconciliation with another believer who has sinned against you. And in one sense, the process is very straightforward. If this happens, Jesus says, go and talk privately to the person who wronged you. If that doesn't solve the issue, get one or two other people involved. And if the problem persists, tell the church. Is the description of this process straightforward? Yes. Is the execution of this process simple? Rarely, if ever. There are so many variables.

What is the nature of the offense and the parties involved? How long should we stay on each

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, chapter 2.

step before moving to the next? Who is the “church” in this context, and what exactly are we expecting them to do? Like many instructions in Scripture, if we want to apply these verses well, we need wisdom. And wisdom requires us to think before we act. So, I’d like to offer you five questions you can ask when someone in the church wrongs you. Questions that will help you apply Jesus’s teaching with wisdom the next time you need to seek reconciliation.

Here’s the first question to ask:

A. Is this sin?

In verse 15, Jesus says, *If your brother sins against you...* (Matthew 18:15).

In this context, the word “brother” means fellow-disciple. So, this can be a brother or a sister in Christ. And though it might seem obvious, it’s worth highlighting: Jesus is teaching us what to do when another Christian *sins* against us. He is not giving us instructions for what to do when another Christian annoys us, or disagrees with us, or fails to act in a way that accords with our preferences. Jesus is not trying to create a community of nit-picky disciples who call each other out on every little thing. Therefore, the next time you feel offended or hurt or put off by a fellow believer, before you do anything else, take a moment to ask yourself, “Did this person sin against me?” And how would you know the answer to that question?

Well, you would consider God’s Word. He is our Lord and our judge. What he commands, we must obey. What he prohibits, we must avoid. To disregard and disobey his word is sin. So, when you consider what’s happened to you, ask yourself, “Is this something the Bible would define as sin?” If not, you’re in the realm of personal preference, or perhaps even personal conviction, and you might still talk to your brother or sister about it, or you might decide to let it go. But what if you determine this person really has sinned against you? They’ve hurt you and harmed their relationship with you. Next, ask yourself...

B. What is my goal?

Before you do anything else, ask yourself, “What am I hoping will happen? What’s my desired outcome?” And if you’re thinking, “Oh man, I’m gonna let her have it.” Or “I’ll show him.” If your goal is to shame or to scorn, stop. And consider the desired outcome Jesus highlights in verse 15 when he says, *If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother* (Matthew 18:15).

The goal is not retribution, it’s reconciliation! It’s not to win an argument, it’s to win the person, to gain your brother or sister and repair the rift in your relationship. Easier said than done. I once heard a pastor tell a story of receiving an angry email from a woman in his congregation. It was clearly typed up in a hurry and aimed to hurt. Despite this pastor’s calm responses, inviting this woman to meet, two more painful emails came—the last one coming from her husband. So, the pastor, eager for reconciliation, went to their house and rang the doorbell. Well, out came the husband... fuming... and looking like he might throw a punch. And this pastor recounted how his gut reaction was to clench his fist and prepare to punch back. But then he thought to himself, “What am I doing? I’m on the porch of a family I love, holding a Bible, and what, I’m going to fight?”²

² I heard this story in person, but it is written in Zack Eswine, *Wiser with Jesus*, 83.

Retribution comes naturally to us. But Jesus is calling us to pursue reconciliation, which is far greater. So, when a brother or sister sins against you, ask yourself, what's my goal? Make sure the answer is that you long to gain your brother or your sister. And then, with a heart eager to make peace, ask yourself...

C. What should I say?

Look at verse 15 again. Jesus says, *If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother* (Matthew 18:15).

Notice, Jesus is describing a private conversation, not a group intervention, not at this phase. Also notice, Jesus is envisioning an in-person conversation. He could have said, "Write them a letter." But he says, "Go... and tell him his fault..." In other words, meet face to face. The human face is remarkable. God has given us over 40 muscles in our face, which we use to express a wide range of emotions. Just by looking at someone's face, we can see joy, anger, fear, confusion, and so on. And telling someone their fault is difficult, delicate, and easy to misinterpret. But if our aim is peace and reconciliation, and our heart is full of love, that will show itself most clearly on our face. So, whenever possible, it's far better to speak about these things in-person, as opposed to over the phone, and certainly as opposed to an email or a text.

Also, it's wise to come prepared. This is not a time to fire from the hip and say whatever comes to mind. This is a time to prayerfully and thoughtfully work out what you will say. Proverbs 29:20 says, *Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him* (Proverbs 29:20). Before you speak, ask yourself, what should I say? You might run the words you plan to speak through a filter I learned from Pastor Ted Olsen: Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind? Then, fourth question,

D. Who should I involve?

First, the conversation should be kept as private as possible. *But Jesus says in verses 16-17, if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church* (Matthew 18:16-17).

It's important to keep in mind that the goal remains the same. The goal is to gain your brother, to win over your sister, to restore the relationship. And if you've not been able to do that on your own, Jesus is saying, bring in some wise counsel. Consider, one or two people that both you and the one who offended you trust and respect. Allow them to consider the matter and to establish the validity of the charge. And we should always remain open to the possibility that we might be wrong! That we have misunderstood the situation, and that our brother or sister has not sinned against us after all.

But if there was in fact a sin, allowing one or two others to confirm the matter will hopefully bring clarity to the offender, leading to a humble response. If not, Jesus says, tell the church. Now, how do you do that? Well, Jesus doesn't say. He doesn't flesh this out with more specific steps and examples. Which is why different churches have interpreted this instruction in different ways. Some interpret this to mean you should inform the entire body of believers. Others interpret this to mean you should inform the church leaders who are responsible for overseeing the body of believers. That is how we would apply this verse here

at The Orchard.

You would talk to a pastor, and we would consider the best path forward, the path we believe would have the greatest chance to prove redemptive. Many times, people have asked me, "What does that process look like at The Orchard?" And my response is that it varies case by case. But we seek to handle these painful matters prayerfully, patiently, and as pastorally as possible. Because the goal remains the same: we want to gain the brother for Christ, to win the sister back to Christ. But after all this, there's a fifth question we must ask when a fellow believer sins against us.

E. When have I done all that I can?

And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (Matthew 18:17).

In 1st century Israel, Gentiles and tax collectors were people outside the community of faith, and far from God. So here's what Jesus is saying: If nothing has proven effective. If the one who sinned against you is not compelled to admit their wrong and reconcile the relationship after... private conversation, the counsel of trusted friends, and the best efforts of the church... Well then tragically, that person is not demonstrating that he or she belongs to God's people.

Which means, instead of continuing to pursue a restored relationship between you and this person, your focus shifts to praying for a restored relationship between this person and Christ. That he or she would repent and receive the forgiving, transforming grace that Jesus alone provides. All of this is challenging. It is far more complex than we often anticipate, so we need wisdom to apply these verses. Thankfully, we have a God who supplies wisdom to those who ask.

So, when your brother or sister sins against you, ask him to help you answer these five questions:

1. Is this sin?
2. What is my goal?
3. What should I say?
4. Who should I involve?
5. And when have I done all that I can?

Then, rest in the assurance that Jesus gives in verse 18-20. He says, *Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them (Matthew 18:18-20).*

There's a lot we could unpack here if we had more time, but in a nutshell, Jesus is saying, "Look to me in humble dependence as you make these difficult decisions, and trust that I will lead you." And in his mercy, sometimes his leading will result in the offender repenting! Which brings us to the second section of our passage today:

2. How to Forgive

What if you pursue reconciliation and it works? What if the person apologizes? That was Peter's question. Look at verse 21: *Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"* (Matthew 18:21).

Before we roll our eyes at Peter we should understand he is putting forward a gracious proposal here. It's not a small thing to offer forgiveness to the same person seven different times. So, Peter has suggested a generous limit to the process. But for Jesus, there's no limit.

Verse 22: *Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times* (Matthew 18:22).

Some translations say, "seventy times seven." But the point is not that 77 is the cap. Or 490. There is no cap, Jesus is saying. The day will never come when your brother or your sister asks for your forgiveness, and you can refuse. And to illustrate why, Jesus tells a parable. The story begins in verse 23: *Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents* (Matthew 18:23-24).

In the 1st century, a talent was a large amount of money—roughly 20 years wages. And this servant owes the king 10,000 talents. That's 200,000 years of wages. In our context, based on an average American salary, this is about \$13 billion. Can you imagine what Dave Ramsey would say about that!? There's no baby-stepping your way out of \$13 billion. This is a debt he could never repay.

Verse 25: *And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt* (Matthew 18:25-27).

10,000 talents. 200,000 years of wages. Forgiven. What mercy!

Verse 28: *But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt* (Matthew 18:28-30).

100 denarii is about 100 days of wages. A significant amount of money, but nothing in comparison to 10,000 talents! And yet, this guy puts his fellow servant in a chokehold, tosses him in debtor's prison, and demands he repay what he owes!

Verse 31: *When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt* (Matthew 18:31-34).

Now, here comes the punchline. Jesus finishes the story, and he looks at Peter and the rest of the disciples and says, *"So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart"* (Matthew 18:35).

You must forgive your brother—your sister—seventy-seven times. You cannot put a cap on your forgiveness. But we know how hard that can be! So, what will help us? Two things that come right out of this parable:

A. Remember God's mercy

The king said to the servant, *Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?* (Matthew 18:33).

"I forgave you a debt you never could have paid. I showed you unparalleled mercy. How could you possibly hold back mercy from your fellow-servant?"

Brothers and sisters, that is our exact position. Our King has forgiven us a debt we never could have paid. And doing so cost him his life, his blood shed upon the cross. When we remember the extent of his mercy to us, we will see that we have no right to withhold mercy from others. But even knowing that, we sometimes find it hard to forgive. And when that is your experience...

B. Ask for God's heart

In Jesus's parable, the king's heart wells up with pity for the desperate servant. That word "pity" can be translated "compassion." This king's compassionate heart reflects the heart of God, who is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and mercy. And as God's people, we are to have the same kind of heart. Again, in verse 35, Jesus says you (and I) must ...*forgive your brother from your heart* (Matthew 18:35).

True forgiveness is not mere lip service. It's not sweeping a wrong under the rug. It comes from the heart. But what do we do when people sin against us and we find our hearts hardened against them even when they ask for our forgiveness? Well, remember, when you become a Christian, God not only promises to cleanse you, he promises to change you. And you can ask him, as David asked him in Psalm 51, *Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! ... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me* (Psalm 51:2, 10).

You can pray, "Lord, give me your heart. Your merciful heart. That I might truly forgive." He will answer.

Conclusion

So, is there someone you need to forgive today? Maybe a fellow believer has wronged you, and you need to go and tell them. Prayerfully consider these five questions:

1. Is this sin?
2. What is my goal?
3. What should I say?
4. Who should I involve?
5. And when have I done all that I can?

And if that person acknowledges what they have done, apologizes for their sin, and asks for your forgiveness, where will you find the strength to forgive? By remembering God's mercy. And by asking for God's heart. Let's ask for that right now.