

Matthew 18:15–20; Ezekiel 33:7–11; Romans 13:8–14

**What does the mercy we receive from God form in a faithful follower of Jesus?**

**Mercy forms a person who can tell the truth for the sake of restoration.**

## **Opening: We Are Very Good at Talking Around One Another**

Brené Brown talks about a moment with her husband, Steve, during a trip to Lake Travis in Texas. They were swimming together, and the moment meant something to her because swimming had been part of their story from the beginning.

Out in the water, she tried to connect with him. Steve responded briefly and kept swimming.

And almost immediately, Brown's mind began writing a story.

- Maybe he didn't find her attractive anymore.
- Maybe something was wrong between them.
- Maybe she had reached toward him and been rejected.

By the time they reached the dock, she had an entire explanation of what was happening between them—and Steve did not even know the story existed. Totally unaware there was a problem...

But instead of making an accusation based upon what she thought she knew, she finally told Steve, in essence, **“What was on her heart...”** And then she told him what she feared.

Steve explained that he had been struggling with a panic attack in the water. His distance had very little to do with what Brown thought it meant. Their **direct conversation** interrupted a story that otherwise could have gone home with them and become resentment. Brown later described the encounter as transformative for their relationship.<sup>1</sup>

**She could have carried home a wound built partly from something that had never actually happened.**

- How many relationships become strained because we talked to ourselves?
- Or talked to somebody else?
- Or interpreted silence?
- Or filled in motives?
- Or decided what someone meant before ever asking them?

Well, I am here to tell that Jesus knows something about human relationships.

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<sup>1</sup> Brené Brown, *Rising Strong* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), excerpt, Penguin Random House Canada, accessed September 6, 2026, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/234211/rising-strong-by-brene-brown-phd-lmsw/9780812985801>.

And in Matthew 18, he gives his disciples a remarkably simple first instruction: **Go to the person.**

## Scripture Reading — Matthew 18:15–20

If you have your Bibles turn to Matthew chapter 18, and will we start at verse 15. If you don't have your Bibles grab a pew bible... **Read Matthew 18**

Let's let verse 15 sink a little into our hearts: *"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you"* (Matthew 18:15). Do you hear the word of the Lord... *"If they listen to you, you have won them over"* (Matthew 18:15).

Those two little phrases contain more of Jesus' way than we sometimes practice. **Go to them. Win them over.**

Jesus does not begin with, "Decide who is right." He does not begin with, "Find somebody who agrees with you." He begins with: **Go to the person.**

## Mercy Goes *Toward* the Person

Brown's situation was largely a misunderstanding, right? Well, Matthew 18 addresses **what to do**. That's an important distinction.

- Sometimes somebody really has hurt us.
- Sometimes something really was said.
- Sometimes trust really was violated.

Jesus does not say: **Pretend it didn't happen.** And he does not say: **Tell everybody else what happened—but not the person who needs to hear and understand.** Nope. Jesus says: **"Go."** He sure does say that a lot, doesn't he? Go and gather. Go and tell. Go and be. And here, when something has happened between us: go to the person.

You guys know that sometimes A hurts B, right?... Say A is me and B is Bruce... Instead of B going to A, B goes to C, David... David hears the story and agrees with Bruce. Then David tells Jack and the whole world knows about it. Everyone knows what A did except A. That is a triangle. It relieves some of the pressure in B for a moment, because now Bruce has somebody (well everybody) on my his side. But it does not heal the relationship that was actually wounded.

- Jesus gives us another possibility: Go to the person.
- Not avoidance. Not aggression. Not gathering a team.

Go with just enough courage and enough love to say, "Something has happened between us, and because you matter to me, I want to talk about it." **That is differentiated love: I can stay connected to you while telling you something difficult.**

And that is how mercy works. **Mercy tells the truth, not to win against another person, but to win the relationship back.**

## **Mercy Tells the Truth Because Love Wants Life**

Now bring Ezekiel into this. Ezekiel is speaking to God's people in a season when their life together has gone terribly wrong. Israel has not simply made a few mistakes. They have resisted God, ignored warning after warning, and they are living with the consequences.

And God gives Ezekiel the image of a watchman. A watchman stood where he could see danger coming. His responsibility was not to create the danger and not to punish the people. His responsibility was to sound the warning.

**Why? Because a warning gives somebody the opportunity to turn.**

That is what matters in Ezekiel 33. Underneath God's warning is God's heart:

*“I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live”* (Ezekiel 33:11).

Do you hear it?

God's truth is not, **“I caught you.”** God's truth is, **“Turn around. Come back. Live.”**

That gives us an important connection to Jesus. We tell the truth in reconciliation not because we want somebody punished, embarrassed, or defeated. We tell the truth because love wants life.

Then Romans 13 gives us the Christian grammar: *“Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law”* (Romans 13:10). So now we can define reconciliation carefully. Reconciliation **does not mean**, “No harm was done.”

Reconciliation begins because something **has** happened. Mercy simply refuses two opposite temptations: **Mercy will not weaponize the truth.** But neither will mercy **hide from the truth.**

**Silence is not always peace, and confrontation is not always love. That is why Jesus gives us another way: truthful love seeking restoration.**

**Mercy Tells the Truth.**

**Why?...**

**Because mercy wants life.**

## The Goal Is Not Being Right — It Is About Relationship

Here is where I want us to hear how Jesus words this. He says, “*You have won them over*” (Matthew 18:15). So, what counts as success?

- Not: **I proved my point.**
- Not: **They admitted I was right.**
- Not: **Finally! Everybody understands what they did to me** (Victim Mentality).

Jesus defines success relationally:

- **You gained your brother.**
- **You gained your sister.**

That changes the emotional posture of the conversation before it begins. Before I speak, I can ask: **What am I hoping happens here?**

- Punishment?
- Vindication?
- Embarrassment?
- Or restoration?

Guess what... That is a holiness question, because sometimes I can say completely truthful words from an utterly unholy heart. **The problem isn't merely whether what I am saying is true. The question is what I want the truth to accomplish.**

## Mercy Listens

There is another detail in Matthew 18 we can easily miss: the passage repeatedly revolves around listening.

Forms of here and listen recur through these few verses. Therefore, Jesus' reconciliation process brings together this understanding.... Truth-telling and listening belong together.

That means Matthew 18 isn't: **I come straighten you out.** It's entering a conversation willing to discover:

- Maybe I misunderstood something.
- Maybe I contributed something.
- Maybe there is more to the story.
- Maybe—like Brené Brown treading water in Lake Travis—the story I am carrying isn't the whole story.

So get this: holy reconciliation requires enough humility to say: **Here is what happened from where I stood. Help me understand what happened from where you stood.**

And you know what? That's mercy telling the truth and remaining teachable.

## Gospel convergence: And Where Is Jesus While We Do This?

Now we come to a verse we hear all the time: “*For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them*” (Matthew 18:20).

We often hear that verse quoted when only a few people gather for worship... And that is certainly true. But look at where Jesus says these words.

**He tells them in the middle of teaching people what to do when relationships are fractured.**

Two people sit across from each other. Something has happened. Truth needs to be spoken. Truth needs to be heard. Neither one knows exactly how the conversation is going to turn out. And Jesus says: **I am there.**

Friends, that is Gospel. Because before Jesus ever tells us to **go toward the person who has hurt us**, God has already come toward us. God did not remain distant from human sin. God came toward us in Jesus Christ. Not because sin did not matter. Not merely to condemn us. **God came to reconcile us.**

And the mercy we have received begins forming us into people who can move toward one another.

## Holy Response

Now back to the question: **What does the mercy we receive from God form in a faithful follower of Jesus?**

**It forms someone who can remain present, speak truthfully, listen humbly, and seek restoration.**

So let this query sink in for a moment: **Is there someone I am talking about whom Christ is asking me to talk with?**

(Pause and hear the crickets)

Now, this passage is about the ordinary conflicts and wounds of life together. It is not a command to place yourself alone in an unsafe situation; abuse, violence, or serious danger require wise boundaries and the help of others.

But for the ordinary wounds we carry between one another, Jesus gives us a holy starting place: **Go toward one another.**

**Mercy tells the truth—not because the relationship does not matter, but because it matters too much to abandon without trying.**