

Confronting Wrongdoers

The Rev. Dr. Peter
G. James

Matthew 18:15-20

Sermon Series: The
Kingdom of God

*We follow an
unwritten code
of silence with
regard to other
people's
behavior.*

I read recently about a teenage girl who destroyed her life doing drugs. She was able to hide her addiction from her parents until the late stages of her drug abuse. Her friends, however, knew all about her addiction. They knew when she came high to school. They knew the person who supplied the drugs. But they chose not to say anything about it.

Why didn't any of her friends confront her abuse? Maybe they didn't think it was their place to say anything about it. Perhaps they thought it was none of their business. Quite possibly they were afraid of the backlash, that they would become ostracized or victimized by retaliatory measures.

If only someone would have said something about her addiction. Most people don't recognize their substance abuse problem until somebody else confronts them with it.

This is not a sermon on substance abuse, per se, but it dramatizes our culture of silence. Nobody, it seems, can confront anybody about anything anymore. We follow an unwritten code of silence with regard to other people's behavior.

Nobody likes a snitch, but neither do we appreciate the "I don't care enough to get involved" type of people. Surely there is a

middle ground between playing God and playing possum.

We are focusing this Lent on what it means to live as kingdom people. As we have said many times previously, the kingdom of God is not merely a place believers go after they die. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:14-15).

We have explored on previous Sundays not passing judgment on disputable matters, speaking truthfully, offering forgiveness and today confronting wrongdoers. You see, relationships matter in the kingdom of God. The church is not merely an organization, it's a living organism. People matter in the kingdom of God.

Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep in the verses that precede our morning lesson. A shepherd leaves his flock of one hundred sheep in search of a single sheep that has gone astray. This parable sets up our morning lesson about people who have strayed.

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone" (18:15). Notice what Jesus says at the end of the sentence, "...go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." The New International Version translates this verse, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault; just between the two of you."

Go directly to people, not around them.

Jesus doesn't say, Go, tell everybody else what that stupid jerk did to you. He urges a private consultation with the person who sinned against us. Don't go public with the infraction. Respect people's dignity enough to go straight to the source. Sin doesn't have to be aired like dirty laundry.

The Old Testament book of Proverbs is replete with pithy maxims about the value of speaking directly to one another: "Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses" (27:5-6). "Whoever winks the eye causes trouble, but the one who rebukes boldly makes peace" (10:10; cf. 12:17, 19; 14:15).

It's a cardinal rule of relationships that we talk directly to people rather than about them. Go directly to people, not around them.

The church must never become a "back door community" with regard to relationships. Use the front door—go directly to the person most immediately involved. Don't use the back door, sneak attack method. As kingdom people, we are committed to direct, face-to-face relationships with one another.

Let me illustrate how conflict often starts in the church. I'll use the hypothetical example of a third grade teacher who has a conflict with a Children's Ministries Director. If the third grade teacher has a complaint, whom does she tell? Does she bring it to the Children's Ministries Director? No, of course not. She tells her

best friend about it. Her best friend, in turn, tells other people about it. Before long, everybody else knows about the infraction except the Children's Ministries Director, who is precisely the person who needs to know about it most!

In the therapeutic world, we call it "triangulating." When two people don't get along, our tendency is to involve a third party in the problem. Three is a crowd when it comes to navigating conflict. A healthy church community is made up of relational dyads, involving two people in face-to-face contact rather than triads involving three people.

If people try to triangle you into an issue that doesn't immediately involve you, call them on it. Say in a polite tone of voice, "Let me stop you a minute. You need to speak to him or her about it, not me!" We would do well to hold each other accountable in this area of human relationships. If you hear me talking inappropriately about someone else, you have my permission to call me on it, just as I am confident I have your support to call you on it. The 17th century reformer John Wesley employed a telling phrase to describe our mutual accountability. He called it "watching over one another in love."

Jim Cymbala serves as pastor of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Church in New York City. He writes about an experience he had 20 years ago. He was speaking to new members joining the church. He felt the Spirit of God prompting him to say, "And now, I charge you that if you ever hear another member speak an unkind word of criticism or slander

“But we won’t let you talk critically about people who aren’t present to defend themselves.”

against anyone—myself, an usher, a choir member or anyone else—that you stop that person in mid-sentence and say, Excuse me, who hurt you? Who ignored you? Who slighted you? Was it Pastor Cymbala. Let’s go to his office right now. He’ll apologize to you, and then we’ll pray together so God can restore peace to this body. But we won’t let you talk critically about people who aren’t present to defend themselves. I’m serious about this. I want you to help resolve this kind of thing immediately. And know this: if you are ever the one doing the loose talking, we’ll confront you.”

It left such an impression on the new members and congregation that they urged Pastor Jim every time the church received new members to say the same thing. So he does. Jim writes, “I know what most easily destroys churches. It is not government oppression. It’s not a lack of funds. Rather, it’s gossip and slander that grieves the Holy Spirit.”

Jesus says, “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have gained that brother or sister” (18:15).

I often hear this passage referenced in connection with church discipline. It involves discipline, to be sure, but this confrontation is not meant to be punitive but restorative. The intent is to bring both the offender and offended back into relationship with each

other. We are not looking for places simply to dump our anger. Our goal is always reconciliation, about gaining a brother or sister.

To show you how seriously Jesus takes reconciliation, turn to Matthew 5:23-24. If we are in worship, knowing someone here has a dispute with us, Jesus advises us to excuse ourselves from worship to reconcile with that person, so we can come to worship together.

I’ve often thought what would happen if we asked people to strictly follow Jesus’ injunction. What would happen if we dismissed everyone who has a dispute with somebody else? Why, we’d clear the place out!

What happens if you confront someone who has wronged you but that person blows it off? Jesus remedies the situation in verse 16: “If you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” Only when the wrongdoer is recalcitrant do we take it to the next level by involving other people. We ask two to three witnesses who can pray about the offense, react sensitively to the guilty party and are willing to speak the truth in love to that person. We are not merely looking for people who can help us gang up on the person.

The practice of recruiting two to three witnesses dates back to Old Testament law about witnesses in a court of law (Deuteronomy 19:15). A defendant cannot be found guilty on the testimony of a single witness. The evidence must be corroborated

...when two to three people agree about their reconciliation and ask God about it, God will grant their request.

by 2-3 additional witnesses (Cf. 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19-20).

I've often heard verses 19-20 used to justify any prayer that two or three believers ask together. "If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Jesus is not talking about getting other people to pray with us for a new car or win the lottery. Jesus teaches us when two to three people agree about their reconciliation and ask God about it, God will grant their request.

We don't go public with the infraction to the whole church (verses 17-18) until every other possible avenue for reconciliation has been exhausted. If steps one and two are handled thoughtfully and prayerfully, there will never be the need to take it to the third level by involving the whole church in the issue.

Let me close by suggesting 10 rules or principles for constructive engagement with each other:

1. If you have a problem with me, come to me.
2. If I have a problem with you, I'll come to you.
3. If people have a problem with me and come to you, send them to me.
4. If people have a problem with you and come to me, I'll send them to you.

5. If you talk to me confidentially, I agree not to tell anyone.
6. If I talk to you confidentially, you agree not to tell anyone.
7. We agree not to use manipulative words like "lots of other people feel as I do." Stick to first person singular. People sometimes gain support for their position by asking leading questions in order to get other people to agree with them.
8. We don't read unsigned notes, letters or anonymous emails.
9. We agree not to use cell phones or email to confront people. Face-to-face contact is always preferable.
10. Pray about where you need God's help in addressing this list.

