

Series: “Broken”

Rebuilding Broken Relationships – Matt. 18:15-20

We continue our series on “restoring hope in a broken world.” Take a look at the screen. This is a majestic oak tree. Oak is some of the best hardwood. It makes great floors, cabinets, and furniture. It’s also a top choice for firewood. These are tough trees. They are resistant to disease and insects. Their bark makes them able to withstand a forest fire, if it’s not too intense.

Just a few feet away is another oak tree. It went down in a wind storm, while the other tree survived. Fierce winds are perhaps the tree's greatest hazard. That's because, even for trees towering over 100 feet, the roots only grow a few feet deep. Erosion or wet soil can weaken the roots to the point where a giant oak can be brought crashing down by high winds. For an oak tree, a strong root system supplies nourishment to the tree, and anchors it to the earth.

Character serves the same function for people. The strength of a person's character below the surface sustains his or her success in life. Strong, good character gives you a base of support from which to withstand the tough times. As you go through life, you see people just like these two trees. Some are well-anchored, and able to withstand the storms of life. Others have a weak root system, and they go down when things get tough. Q: Which tree do you want to be like?

Today, we are talking about “Rebuilding Broken Relationships.” I can’t think of anything that will develop and test and prove your character more than working through relationships. These skills are in short supply in our society. We see way too many people who “cut out and run” when things get tough, instead of doing the hard work to iron things out. And then we wonder why things are such a mess.

This is one area where the church definitely needs to take the lead. We don’t need to go to Oprah, or Dr. Phil, or Jerry Springer for help on how to resolve conflicts. Jesus Christ gave clear instructions. If we follow His teaching, and have the difficult conversations, and pray through things together, bathed in a spirit of love, God will get the victory, and you will get the blessing.

So, here’s what Jesus said to do in our Gospel today... “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. But 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. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:15-17).

Let’s unpack and apply this teaching of Jesus. First, understand –

- We are human beings. There will be conflict.

No matter what “the experts” may say, a basic fact is – we all have a dark side, what the Bible and the theologians call a “sin nature.” Yes, there is a degree of good in each person, but we also have the ability to do really bad things, too, because of sin. And because of the bad choices and behaviors we make, we develop conflicts with other people. You just can’t avoid it. It’s going to happen. Some of you will probably get upset before this day is through.

Sometimes new Christians think that things in the church will be different. They should be. But the reality is, even Christians have their disagreements and fights! So, if you’re new at this, don’t lose your faith over a church squabble, or a disagreement with another Christian. It will happen, sooner or later!

The key is – How do you handle it? What do you do? How do you react? Do you fight it out? Do you run? Do you ignore it? Do you quit? What should you do? Jesus gives some pretty clear teaching in these verses.

• Let's look at Jesus' teaching on conflict resolution: (This is sequential – the goal is restoring harmony and fellowship) And, of course this applies to other areas of our lives...:

1. Work on things between the two of you. (v. 15)

What do we usually do? Go and talk to 3 or 4 other people. Start the "gossip train." Is that what Jesus said to do? No. He said, "Go privately." Pray. Think about how to approach the other person. Go to them in a spirit of love: I want what's best for you, and for me, and for the church fellowship. Work things out between the two of you, and that's the end of it. 90% of interpersonal conflicts should be resolved right here. What if that doesn't work?

2. Take one or two others along. (v. 16)

So what do you do, find a couple of allies and go gang up on the person? No. Find spiritual leaders who are trustworthy, wise, who love both of you and love the church, and are able to intercede. Find people of prayer. Part of the process may be that they will point out some things that are your fault. As the two conflicted parties talk things out with these trusted leaders, peace can most times be restored. Probably the next 9% of disagreements can end here. What if this still doesn't work? What about the 1% of times that a person just won't listen to reason?

3. Take matters to the church. (v. 17)

So, what do you do, stand up in the middle of a service, and spill your guts? No. Please don't do that! First, resolve to protect the unity of our church. Second, confide in your pastors or Commission of Elders. We are here to support and protect your spiritual life and our church's unity.

When a person becomes a member of this church they are asked to sign a Mount Olive Welcome Covenant. This first statement of the covenant is...

I. I WILL PROTECT THE UNITY OF MY CHURCH

...By acting in love toward other members

...By refusing to gossip

...By following the leaders

This is the first item, and we take it seriously. From time to time, a person will realize that they aren't living up to the Membership Covenant, and they will voluntarily withdraw. What about an extreme case, where even that doesn't happen? Jesus said, finally, if all else fails -

4. Withdraw fellowship. (v. 17)

This is a last resort. At a certain point, the purity of the core of the church must be preserved. People who follow Jesus Christ have a spiritual commitment, and it is to be lived out in a Christian lifestyle of love and service. The membership of the church must keep things straight. When they don't, the church will eventually fracture and divide. Even with this said, there is a goal of redemption and restoration for the fallen brother or sister. (Gal. 6:1-2; 2 Cor. 2:5-11)

Let me clarify a point here. At Mount Olive LC we proclaim to be a church that is "Living to Love People to Christ." We welcome people who are spiritual seekers. We try to remove the barriers so that the average person can come and hear about God's love and plan for their life. We want everyone to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ.

We want to be very welcoming and patient with those who are not yet Believers. And we expect Believers to begin a process of growth in character and Christ-likeness that will be life-long. (Remember the oak tree?). "We are firmly rooted & growing in God's Word." (Vision statement)

Let's see how Jesus applied this to his own group of disciples: Luke 22:19 – “And Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’”

It was the Last Supper. Jesus was demonstrating to his disciples what his life was all about. He would shed his blood on the cross for their forgiveness. This supper was done in the context of Christian fellowship, setting the pattern for the New Testament Church. It was very beautiful and meaningful. But –

- Even as Jesus was instituting the Last Supper, the disciples were in conflict and competition with each other. As unbelievable as it seems, right in the middle of this poignant event, the text says they started arguing among themselves. And it was over which one of them was the greatest! How weird is that!?! I can just imagine Jesus sighing deeply, and maybe rolling his eyes. They still didn't get it.

Let's be honest. We're not much better. Jesus had to set them straight. He taught them, “The greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves... I am among you as one who serves.” (Luke 22: 26-27) He will have to set us straight too, from time to time. Here's the bottom line:

- Jesus gave his body and blood for our forgiveness. By receiving him, we will no longer be in conflict with God. This also makes possible our reconciliation to other people.

We choose to do what Jesus would do. Jesus took on our nature and humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! In spite of our faults, failings, and rebellion, Jesus who knew no sin, became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God. He did not count our sins and our failures against us but gave himself into death because of love.

It's not through the power of positive thinking; it's not through the inherent goodness of the human heart; it's not through government programs. It's only through the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ. Only through Him can we be forgiven and at peace with God. Only through him can we find peace with one another.

If you have personal faith in Jesus Christ, you are invited to His Table here (as you are invited today). If you have never placed your faith in Jesus, you can right now. “Jesus, please be my Savior, my Forgiver, my Leader, my Lord.”

Jesus said, “This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, shed for your forgiveness. Take and drink.” What love our Savior has for us! And, because of His love, we can love one another and we should treat one another in love. Beloved, let us love one another. In Jesus, Amen.