

Relationships with Others - Part 1

Resolving Conflict

Matthew 18: 15-20

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Managing our relationship with others



Evil and wrongs exist. How do we face evil and wrongs? This gospel reading from Matthew provides some very incisive insights. A laissez faire style of life seems very attractive. Live and let live seems a great principle to go by, but we live with other people and we have to get along or life can be pretty miserable. Today's Gospel reading deals with adult to adult relationships, in particular those where the actions of one have caused harm and hurt to another.

What do I do when an adult seriously wrongs me? Do I start talking about the wrong done with everybody? Do I brood over it with a glum face? Do I abuse the person who wronged me? Shall I silently bear the wrong that has been done? Shall I pretend it was a misunderstanding or a communication gap and short circuit?

The reading provides us with some astonishing ways to deal creatively with such situations. We are bluntly told that we must all feel responsible for such situations. This is a very important first principle that should govern the attitude of both the wrong doer as well as the one who is wronged.

This is a basic attitude that we should adopt before we begin any damage control of the situation. A "holier than thou" attitude can only exacerbate such situations.

Another basic principle we should adopt in order to deal creatively with such situations is to show love. If any situation is to develop creatively, we need to adopt an attitude of understanding, caring and sympathy.

Finally, today's Gospel provides us with the structure and procedure within which these two attitudes should operate. We should follow three steps towards finding a solution

The first step requires the wronged person to take the initiative. He/she must meet the wrongdoer and talk things over. He/she must not wait for the wrongdoer to approach him/her. If the two are able to agree, then something great has been achieved.

The next step follows only if the two are not able to agree. In this case, the wronged party must again take the initiative and involve a third party to help resolve the matter. The third party's advice on the matter should be final.

If this step also does not succeed the wronged party should accept the fact that the wrongdoer does not see eye to eye with him or her. The Gospel talks about treating him or her as a pagan or a tax collector.



Now this is interesting. A pagan is anyone who lives by his/her fears, emotions and desires. He/she has not known the action, mercy and compassion of God. The pagan does not know that God has created all, nor that God came to live with us all. He/she does not believe that God wishes to make everyone whole. In short, a pagan lives and acts by his/her own feelings and refuses to live in the image of the Triune God. A pagan refuses to face situations and people in a creative, redemptive and sanctifying manner. A pagan is not bothered about the fact that he/she is made in the likeness of the Triune God.

And what of the tax collector? The tax collector only knows how to count and collect the dues of everybody except his or her own. A tax collector forgets that he or she also has to pay his or her dues. A tax collector never writes off the dues of others. The tax collector knows nothing of the mercy revealed by the Triune God.

In short, when we are wronged, it is the one who is hurt who must take the initiative to heal the relationship, first directly, then by mediation. If these steps fail, let us beware of becoming pagans or tax collectors. Let us be daring enough to accept the fact that there are pagans and tax collectors in our midst.



Both the one who is hurt as well as the wrongdoer must love one another as God Himself, the Triune God loves us. The Triune God lets His sun shine on the Good as well as the Evil.

A rabbi asked his students, "How do you know that night has ended and day has begun?" The first and brightest of the students offered an answer: "Rabbi, when I look out at the fields and I can distinguish between my field and the field of my neighbour, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun." A second student offered his answer: "Rabbi, when I see an animal in the distance, and I can tell what kind of animal it is, whether a cow or a horse or a sheep, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun." Then a third student offered yet another answer: "Rabbi, when I see a flower and I can make out the colours of the flower, whether they are red or yellow or blue, that's when night has ended and day has begun.

Each answer brought a sadder, more severe frown to the rabbi's face, until finally he shouted, "No! None of you understands. "Then, Rabbi, tell us, "How do we know that night has ended and day has begun?"

The rabbi stared back into the faces of his students, and with a voice suddenly gentle and imploring, he responded:

"When you look into the face of the person who is beside you, and you can see that person is your brother or sister, then finally the night has ended and the day has begun".

"Hastening that heavenly day is the moral work of our generation".

Amen