

What Comes First in Reconciliation

Meta

Date: September 6, 2026

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Ezekiel 33:1-11

Psalms 119:33-48

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 18:15-20

Opening

In the 1960s Americans began taking more vacations overseas, and one of the most popular destinations was the Emerald Isle. As one does when traveling to new lands, especially foreign lands, one can easily get lost. Such was the common experience of many American travelers around the Irish countryside, that a stock joke emerged. The lost Americans find an Irish country farmer asking, "How do we get to Dublin from here?" To which the farmer replies, "Well, to start with, this isn't a good place to start."¹

Where do we start when we get lost in our relationships, when we lose peace and harmony in our friendships? We don't start with Matthew 18. Yes, you heard me correctly. We don't begin with Matthew 18. We don't begin from the place where we got lost. One of the most important lessons about Matthew 18; one of the simple facts that we overlook about this passage on reconciliation is this –it's 18 chapters into an entire narrative about Jesus and the Kingdom of God. And that makes all the difference.

This brief passage from Matthew 18 has been elevated over the past 20 years, and especially among Anglicans. Thanks be to God for that. There is profound wisdom, and help in Jesus' three stages of reconciliation. First we speak one-on-one in private. If the struggle with a sister or brother remains after that one-on-one conversation, we include a few trusted believers in the matter in stage 2. If an erring brother or sister doesn't respond to that small group in stage 2, then the presence and counsel of the wider church is necessary as a final resort in stage 3.

Many of us grew up in church traditions where reconciliation wasn't discussed or taught. We weren't formed in the wisdom of Jesus when we struggle in relationships. So I'm grateful for the *attention* and the *intention* in our church to follow the Scriptures, to follow the way of Jesus when we need to make

¹ Anecdote heard from The Rest is History podcast, August 19, 2026

peace with one another. We need the Jesus wisdom in Matthew 18 to restore us when we experience brokenness in relationships.

Reading Holistically

But the wisdom of Jesus about reconciliation and relationships doesn't begin with Matthew 18. Instruction on reconciliation doesn't begin with what's gone wrong. We have to come to Matthew 18 the same way the disciples did—after extensive learning about the Kingdom of God. So let's start with the Kingdom of God. Let's start from there, where Jesus proclaims his Kingdom in his first two sermons.

Hear Jesus first sermon from Matthew 4. It's one sentence: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Remember his second and greatest sermon that follows right after—the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7.

Without these two sermons as the foundation for our relationships—repentance and the Sermon on the Mount—we cannot apply a practical theology of reconciliation. One could even say that everything that Jesus teaches after the Sermon on the Mount is extended commentary from topics introduced in...the Sermon on the Mount!

What is the first sin Jesus addresses in the Sermon on the Mount? Anger towards my brother. It's there in Matthew 5 right after the Beatitudes. Jesus said:

*"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment"*²

Jesus continues in Matthew 5 to instruct his disciples when they succumb to anger to take the initiative and make peace with the brother whom they have offended. Before we ever get to Matthew 18, our Lord has taught us to repent of our own sins first and seek reconciliation when we have offended another. The way to Matthew 18 is paved by repentance and humility.

And before we come to Matthew 18, we go through Matthew 7 first, the last section in the Sermon on the Mount. What's in Matthew 7? Jesus said

*Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."*³

Here is divine wisdom. And let us read Matthew 7 wisely, closely, and prayerfully on our way to Matthew 18. I cannot help my brother wash out a speck of sawdust from his eye when I have a 2x4 protruding from my eyes. Here is a carpenter's parable by our Lord the carpenter! This must have been a workshop joke long before he preached this message on the mountainside.

But note well what Jesus says. It's not that I never confront my brother, knowing that I have my own sins. Repentance and dealing with my sins (perhaps anger, perhaps something else) is the first step so

² Matthew 5.21-22a

³ Matthew 7.3-5

that I will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. It's not that Jesus forbids speaking a difficult word, a difficult truth to my brother. It's that I'm called to do so with humility and with the spirit of mercy.

Gaining the Brother

When I have walked through Jesus' first two sermons, I've been catechized in his way of reconciliation, discipled in the way he makes peace in brokenness. Christ has paved the way to Matthew 18 through the paths of repentance and humility. Now we can hear this vital wisdom in Matthew 18 on the wider plane of Jesus' Kingdom teaching.

There's a deep and holy preparation to approach our brother and sister about a fault they have committed. But following Jesus' path throughout his Gospel, he commends us to do so in this way:

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.

Instead of meditating on each of the three steps in this reconciliation method, I want to focus on the **goal**. The goal is more important than the three steps. But it's easy to forget the goal of this teaching and this process. What is the goal that Jesus gives when sin separates two brothers?

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.

The purpose of approaching a brother or sister who has caused offense is not personal vindication. It is not to be proved right. It is to *gain your brother or sister*.

Sin separates what God made to be whole. Sin separates us from God. Sin divides us within ourselves. As St Gregory of Nyssa says, sin causes 'a civil war to break out between body and soul.' That's why we can't address sin in a brother or sister unless we continuously practice the disciplines of repentance and humility ourselves. A house divided cannot stand.

Sin not only rends the physical and spiritual from that original wholeness. Sin threatens the division of brother from brother, sister from sister.

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.

This is the goal—restoration with a brother or sister in Christ whom we love. We must keep that goal ever before the eyes of our heart.

Applying Matthew 18 with Prudence

Before saying anything further, it's important to note that Jesus' way of reconciliation here is for serious matters in relationship, particularly when the future of a relationship is at stake. But there are ordinary and minor irritations in family and community life where we just run into each other. Not every short or unfair word spoken to me needs a conversation. Sometimes I need to practice forbearance in solitude with Christ. Love is patient and love covers a multitude of sins, to quote St. Paul and St. Peter.

But when we doneed Jesus' wisdom in Matthew 18 for those weighty matters of brokenness, we still need to apply this process with wisdom and common sense. Matthew 18 is not a handbook or a policy manual, it is biblical wisdom. And biblical wisdom depends much on common sense, what we would call prudence.

Let's take this first stage of Matthew 18, when Jesus commends us to speak one on one in a private setting. There are certain conflicts where it would not be wise for the injured party to approach the offending brother or sister in a one-on-one setting. In some situations, it's not a violation of Scripture to include one or maybe two fellow Christians in the first conversation. It may well be the better part of wisdom. If my goal is to gain my brother or sister, if I'm prayerfully seeking Christ—what is the best way for my brother/sister to receive this conversation for the first time? When I aim to gain my brother or sister before we even have the conversation, I'm already submitting to Jesus.

So far as it depends

When we come into relational brokenness, it's not only the offense that causes pain, it's the process itself. The uncertainty. Will this be mended? Will it be restored? And the honest answer is: it depends. That's the scriptural answer when we lose relational peace. Hear St. Paul again, writing to the Romans about life together in the Church:

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

You cannot be both sides of the relationship. You can control what depends on you. You cannot control what depends on another.

We had a ping pong table in our basement when I was a kid. I once had a lively ping pong match against Fr. John Roop at a diocesan event. You will not be surprised that a) he is good and b) I lost. I want a rematch though. I've been working on my game.

On boring summer days as a kid, when my sisters didn't want to play and neighborhood kids weren't around, I gave it go trying to serve and then dash to the other end of the table, and return it. That lasted for maybe 2 minutes. But you get tired of trying to play a game that needs two to keep things going.

The same applies in difficult conversations. If someone is unwilling or unavailable to work through things, you're at an impasse. You can't be their response. You've done all you can do to work through it in conversation. That doesn't mean it's over. It means that you've done *all that depends on you* and now you watch and pray.

Only God can break that impasse, the silence, the resistance or whatever blocks the way to peace. And may it be so that he would. But in the waiting, be patient in this trial, be constant in prayer, and place all your hope in God. Remember that our Lord has quite a strong record of making a way when there is no way; of making things new from this most intractable situations.

Closing

This is a tough topic and it's a tough one to preach. I'm brought to my knees. But as I close, I offer this. My discipleship is not only scriptural, it is experiential. I am the brother who has been gained. I am the erring brother who has been restored in relationship when brothers and sisters have spoken the truth in love with the gentleness of Jesus. . Lord, may the goodness of that grace in my moments

of failure, the blessing of mercy received be ever with me. For these moments not only restore me, they prepare me to be truthful and merciful, honest and gracious, when the Lord calls me to address a brother in gentleness. So let us be gracious to one another as fellow sinners, looking unto Jesus who is able to heal and restore us. And let us live in hope of restored unity, for "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity...For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore"; and all for the glory of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.