

# 8

# Enriching Christian Community

## Forgiveness and Discipline in the Church

*What do you think is involved in genuine forgiveness?*

Jesus assumes that there will be conflict in the Christian community: the case of being 'sinned against' by a brother is the centre of his teaching in this part of Matthew's gospel. As you work through this study you should also assume that to varying degrees—some minor, some extremely damaging—everyone in your group will have suffered the pain of being sinned against. All of us have experienced this kind of conflict.

You will note that in this passage Jesus is addressing his disciples (cf Mt 18:1 and the repetition of "brother" throughout). Therefore, our discussion today is limited to the case of a fellow Christian sinning against us.

### Read Matthew 18:15-25

1. What rule does Jesus set down for the occasion when a Christian person sins against you? (v 15)

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2. Imagine yourself in the situation where you need to go to someone who has sinned against you. How do you feel when, alone, you approach that person? What is your aim in talking to them? What words might you use to actually begin that conversation?

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3. At our Church Seminar 'Resolving Conflict Well' on September 2<sup>nd</sup> we described the major steps to reconciliation after conflict. Take a few moments to review these steps and explain them to anyone who wasn't present:

- Shared understanding of the problem
- Acceptance of responsibility for our contribution to the problem
- Apology for specific words and behaviour or omissions
- Restitution
- Repentance (hint: do not confuse this with apology or regret)

4. What should happen if the 'sinning brother' refuses to begin the process of reconciliation when confronted with his sin? (v16)

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*Our culture is very keen on the idea of taking along a mediator or referee when two people try to sort out conflict. Sometimes this can be helpful, but what dangers might there be with this step in a Christian community?*

*If the purpose of the witnesses in v16 is not that of 'mediator', where might this role of mediation take place?*

5. What does the text indicate is the purpose of the 'witnesses' who come along to meet with the 'sinning brother' in verse 16? What might be their role in Jesus' three-step plan for restoring relationship when one brother sins against another?  
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6. What is the third step when a Christian brother refuses to reconcile with you? (v17) Practically, how might this happen in our context?  
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7. The possible outcomes of 'telling it to the church' are that either the sinning brother is 'bound' to disciplinary action or 'loosed' free to continue meeting and participating in the Christian community (v17-19). Practically speaking, what would it mean to treat an unrepentant sinning brother as a 'pagan or tax collector'? What would be the purpose of this action?  
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8. Jesus makes a promise in verse 20. In the context of this passage, what is the specific nature of this promise?  
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9. In verses 20-35 the discussion moves to the point of actually forgiving the Christian person who has sinned against you. How would you summarise Jesus' aim in telling his parable?  
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*This is the final study in our series Enriching Christian Community. For you, what have been the most challenging issues we have discussed? In what areas do you think that your group has grown?*

10. Jesus teaching that there is no limit to Christian forgiveness (vv 22, 35) is deeply challenging, especially to those who have been deeply wounded by another person. How might you help such a person come to terms with Jesus' teaching here?  
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*Close your time together by praying for one another.*

## Practical Assignment

The final practical assignment in this series on Christian Community is actually a personal and private prayer activity. The aim of this prayer time is to help you process your own hurts and wounds before God and then to move you towards forgiveness and reconciliation with whomever has sinned against you.

Set aside a good period time for uninterrupted prayer—perhaps an hour. Find a solitary place where you will not be interrupted. The following comments are provided as prompts and suggestions to stimulate and shape your prayer time.

A. When you are there, read Mt 18:15-35 again to remind you of this study.

B. Pray and ponder these verses, asking that God would reveal to you those people with whom you have unresolved conflict.

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (*Psalms 139:23-24*)

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.  
(*Matthew 5:9*)

C. As you consider those people and the situations of conflict that they entail for you, ask yourself whether you can (with God's help) forgive them without having to approach them. What specific hurts will you have to absorb and now leave behind? What action could you take to (actually or symbolically) demonstrate your forgiveness of that person?

D. Perhaps it is impossible for you to talk with a certain person because they are no longer alive or they are unwilling to talk with you. Tell God about this situation. Ponder this question: 'What does God know about opening up forgiveness for a person who does not currently want reconciliation?' You might also like to read Luke 23:34 and Rom 5:6-8. What might you do to open up a pathway of forgiveness for that person?

E. If you decide that, in order to restore your relationship, you must approach the person who sinned against you, begin to pray for that person. Pray for their response to your approach and plan what you will say. Pray for reconciliation.

F. If you can, pray *The Lords Prayer*—pausing at suitable phrases that will help you in this process of restoring relationships.

G. Make a time to return to this place of prayer and review your situation at a specific time. Ask God to show you the ways in which you have advanced peace between yourself and others. Consider what other actions you might take.