WHEN SOMEONE SINS AGAINST YOU

A tired truck driver pulled his rig into an all-night truck stop. The waitress had just served him when three tough looking, leather jacketed motorcyclist walked in and started giving him a hard time. Not only did they verbally abuse him, one grabbed the cheeseburger off his plate, another took a handful of his French fries, and the third picked up his coffee and began to drink it. How do you think he responded? He calmly rose, walked to the front of the restaurant. Put his money for the food on the cash register, and went out the door. The waitress followed him to put the money in the till and stood watching out the door as the big truck drove away into the night. When she returned, one of the bikers said to her, "Well, he's not much of a man, is he?" She replied, "I don't know about that, but he sure is not much of a truck driver. He just ran over three motorcycles on his way out of the parking lot."

Matt 18:15 "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that `every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Today we are concluding our series We Are The Church. Notice that Jesus is speaking here to the church. He is addressing Christians. This is dealing with believers who are in conflict. Unity is always an important issue in the church.

Larry Crabb wrote, "The difference between spiritual and unspiritual community is not whether conflict exists, but rather our attitude toward it and our approach to handling it. When conflict is seen as an opportunity to draw more fully on spiritual resources, we have the makings of spiritual community." In other words, it is how we handle conflict that determines the level of our spiritual maturity!

The truth of the matter is that relationships can be strengthened through conflict only IF we handle them correctly. What makes or breaks relationships, and churches, is how we choose to respond to conflict. We must learn how to walk in love while dealing with conflict when it comes. In this passage Jesus gives us a very simple four step plan on how to handle conflict in the church when it happens:

1. The First Step – the subjective view

This is where most people often make a critical mistake. The first thing to do if someone hurts you is to go to them privately. This means that you do not go to your friends, or family, or pastor, or spouse first, but rather you go to the person with whom there is a problem. If someone comes to you with a problem about another person, here is the very first thing you need to ask them, "Have you addressed this with that person first?" If not, encourage them to do so. That is where Jesus said to start.

Why is this so important? Because 9 times out of 10 the conflict could be easily be resolved simply by sitting down with the person who has offended you and speaking with them. We all make mistakes from time to time. I know I do. I could write a book from all the dumb things I have said. When you speak a lot of words you are going to say dumb things from time to time, it is an occupational hazard. There are times that people have been offended by things that I have said, which is to be expected. The question is, what do you do with that.

What happens far too often is that people get offended by someone and they do nothing about it. Instead of going to the person, they just start telling their friends about how awful so and so is, so now you have a whole group that is offended.

A week later you see that person and decide to speak with them. They apologize and you forgive them. The problem is that, even though the issue is now resolved for you, your actions have made the issue unresolvable. It is resolved with you but not with all the people you dragged into that conflict. The way to avoid this is by going to the person who offended you first.

If you are planning to come to me as a pastor about a conflict with another person, let me save you some time. Talk to the person about the problem first. I can't help you until you are willing to address the issue with them first.

I remember when I first moved to Kuwait. A member of the congregation came to my office and started the conversation by saying, "Pastor Steve, I am glad you are here. I have some real concerns about Pastor Jerry (the Senior Pastor)". I stopped the person and called Pastor Jerry on the phone saying there was someone in my office that wanted to speak with him. When he arrived, I left. No one ever tried that again…

Gal 6:1-2 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. 2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

God calls us as a family of believers to help one another seek restoration. We need each other. One of the key words here is the word 'gently'. How do we deal with one another and handle conflict in a way that is truthful yet loving? Here are some guidelines for when you are hurt and you need to confront someone on an issue:

PREPARE WITH PRAYER. Always go into confrontation with an attitude of humility and love. Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Pray for the person continually. It is hard to stay mad at someone you are praying for.

DEAL WITH THE ISSUE ASAP! Don't put off the conflict for weeks or months in the hopes that it will just go away by itself. The situation will only get worse as anger and bitterness begin to take root. People who bottle up conflict will explode eventually. As well, the offense will often get blown out of proportion the longer it sits unaddressed. As it says in Ephesians 4:26 "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry!"

NEVER TRY TO RUN FROM CONFLICT. It will always follow you. I know of people who have changed churches because of conflict but that really solves nothing. All of us as believers will spend eternity together in Heaven. Sorry to tell you this, but you are stuck with the person you are sitting next to forever. Since you cannot avoid them, deal with the issue.

I lived on a ship called the Doulos for 2 years. It was a small ship with over 300 people from 50 nationalities living on board. Conflict was inevitable and there was nowhere to hide from people when it happened. I learned to deal with conflict quickly. It is hard to have hurt feelings with something that you rub shoulders with every day!

MEET FACE TO FACE WITH THE PERSON. Jesus said, "GO and SHOW him his fault." That means no e-mail. No phone call. No letter or note. I someone puts a letter in my mailbox, the first thing I do when I open it is I look to see who it is from, whether the note has been signed or not. If it has not been signed, I do not read it.

Anything less than a face-to-face conversation places a barrier between the people involved. You cannot communicate on paper like you communicate face to face because so much of communication is nonverbal. Words without context can be very destructive. Meet face to face.

BEGIN WITH AFFIRMATION. When addressing an issue start off by affirming the person and your relationship with them. Your goal is to restore a friendship and not just win an argument. Let the person know up front how much they mean to you.

MAKE OBSERVATIONS, NOT ACCUSATIONS. That means addressing actions that have occurred, rather than pointing your finger or attacking a person's character. Use "I" statements instead of "you" statements. Saying "I was hurt" is always better than "You are a liar!" Remember if you throw a verbal punch, you will probably get one back. Don't accuse and put someone on the defensive. Take ownership of your own actions and feelings.

PROMOTE RESOLUTION. The point is not to win an argument. The point is not to prove someone wrong. The point is to restore trust and harmony. In doing this make sure to express kindness, showing that you have forgiven them.

As I said, the vast majority of conflicts can be resolved at this stage if we will simply have the courage and care enough about another person to take that first step. However, sometimes resolution cannot be found at this level. It is then and only then that you take that conflict to the next step.

2. The Second Step – the objective view

Sometimes resolution of an issue cannot be found because it is being seen from 2 very different viewpoints. If you and the person who hurt you are seeing things differently it can be helpful to bring in another person. That neutral third party can look at the situation objectively. The purpose again is not to prove that you are right or win an argument but to bring reconciliation and peace.

The key word here is NEUTRAL. This does not mean ganging up on someone. A mediator is someone you trust that is impartial. It is someone who can help keep emotions in check and help clarify the issues. This person is not your spouse. Bringing a spouse into a conflict will only make the issue worse because it is very hard for them to be objective and not immediately take your side.

Remember that humility is essential in conflict resolution. To be humble means to bring low which is the opposite of what our human nature wants to do in conflict. Pride seeks to exalt itself, to justify itself, to prove itself right. This only fuels the conflict's fire.

When we are dealing with conflict with another person, the goal is reconciliation, not justification. In other words, our hope is to mend the relationship, not to choose sides and declare a winner. When only one person wins, everybody loses. We must ask the Lord to search our hearts before we deal with a conflict and ask "Am I walking in love and motivated by love?" If not, get your heart right first, and then deal with the problem at hand.

It is not surprising that Jesus addresses this issue by starting out in Matt 18 by saying that we must become like little children:

Matt 18:1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 2 He called a little child and had him stand among them. 3 And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

A third person can be especially helpful in a marriage disagreement. Sometimes it is good to sit down with someone like a pastor or trusted elder to discuss an issue.

3. The Third Step – the leadership view

In some cases, resolution cannot be found even with a neutral person involved. Often this happens when one person will not acknowledge the issue or deal with the offense. The problem at this point is that, without resolution, the conflict can go unchecked and bitterness can begin to take root.

Rom 12:18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

As Christians we are called to community. We were never designed to live the Christian life alone but to live it out in the context of a loving and caring community of fellow believers. Conflict between two people has a way of spilling out and becoming an issue which rips spiritual community apart.

In times like this spiritual leadership should be brought in to pray about the issue and to recommend a course of action. When Jesus says “tell it to the church” that does not mean that you just tell everyone about your issue. We talked about that last week when we talked about gossip. It means the leadership.

There will be times when people will need to agree to disagree. We are called to live in unity – not uniformity. Just because Christians disagree, they can still walk together with common purpose and vision. Sometimes leadership can encourage a greater vision that helps put conflict into perspective and resolves the issue.

John Wesley and George Whitefield were good friends in their earlier years, Wesley having begun his outdoor preaching ministry at Whitefield's encouragement. As time went on the men disagreed, with Whitefield leaning more heavily toward Calvinism than his younger friend's Arminianism. When Whitefield died, Wesley was asked if he expected to see Dr. Whitefield in heaven. In exaggerated but honest respect he answered, "No, he'll be so near the throne of God that men like me will never even get a glimpse of him!" Though differing, they did not lose their sense of oneness in Christ.

Hopefully, with the help of the leadership of the church, the conflict can be seen for what it is a resolved peacefully. However, if the conflict continues threatening the church, then you need to take the last step:

4. The Fourth Step - protecting the church

In very rare instances there can be times when conflict threatens to not only tear apart a relationship between two people but it can destroy the work of the church.

Conflict can be like cancer in the body of Christ. It can start small but quickly grow and become destructive. A resentful, grudge-bearing spirit can drive us to do strange things.

Not long ago a man was divorced by his wife and the court ordered him to pay a certain amount of alimony and child-support every month-and he grudgingly paid it in nickels. Every time his alimony and child-support payment came due, 160 pounds of nickels landed at his wife's door.

Another divorced man was ordered by the court to equally divide all the joint-property of his broken marriage with his ex-wife. He chose to do so with a chain-saw. As his neighbors looked on, he carefully measured the million dollar suburban home that he and his wife had lived in for several years. When he found the precise mid-point of the home, he revved up his chain-saw and proceeded to cut his own home - floor, walls, ceiling, and roof-precisely in half.

There are many shows on reality TV that deal with people trying to Repossess property. Shows like Operation Repo, Repo Games, Repo Man, Lizard Lick Towing, South Beach Tow and even Airplane Repo. I remember watching one show where the repo guys came and got the car they were repossessing lifted with the tow truck. The owner came running out and tried to fight the repo guys. When he realized he was not going to be able to stop them from taking the car, he lit a bottle full of gasoline and threw it into his car which exploded into flames. He would rather destroy it then let someone take it away.

Unfortunately, I have also seen that in the church. People who are so bent on getting their own way that they are willing to kill and destroy anything or anyone in their path. People who are in such pain that they are willing to tear apart even the things they love just to prove a point. We all know John 3:16, but often forget 1 Cor 3:16:

1 Cor 3:16 Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

The context of this is important. While it is true that our own bodies are a temple and that the Holy Spirit lives within us, that is not what Paul is talking about. He is using this in the plural – you yourselves. He is talking about the church. He is addressing people that would harm the church.

The purpose of church discipline is protective and redemptive. The objective is the restoration of the person who has sinned. Sometimes this means identifying the problem publicly within the church. This means bringing the issue out into the open and forcing the person who has sinned to deal with the issue in a public way. The desire is not to hurt the person but to see them deal with the issue and be restored.

We see that Paul had to deal with this;

1Co 5:1-6 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. 2 And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? 3 Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. 4 When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present,

5 hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. 6 Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?

1 Cor 5:9-13 I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people -- 10 not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. 11 But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. 12 What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? 13 God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

There are times when shepherds need to step in and protect the flock from destruction. In the church in Corinth there was a man who was sleeping with father's wife. Worded this way it probably means his stepmother, not his biological mother. Paul instructs the church to expel this man from the church. The reason is to protect the church, so that the example of his sin (yeast) does not work its way through the whole batch. The purpose is also clear, so that the man may deal with his sin (by destroying the sinful nature) and be saved.

The goal of excommunication is not only to protect the body but to save the sinner. We see that in this situation in the church in Corinth there was eventually repentance and restoration. The goal was not to simply punish the guilty person but to bring healing and restoration.

When I was a pastor in Leamington, it was a Mennonite church. In the Old Order Churches, often excommunication was used as a weapon. I had a friend in the church that I went fishing with often. He had come out of an Old Order Mexican Mennonite church. I had said that we should go out for lunch some day and he said great. I called and suggested that we go out that Thursday for lunch. He suddenly got very quiet and I could tell something was bothering him. I asked my Associate Pastor about it and he laughed. He told me about Donnadach. In Low German, that means 'Thursday'. If a pastor called you and told you that they wanted to see you on Thursday, it meant that you were being excommunicated. I quickly called my friend back and changed the day to Friday.

2 Cor 2:6 The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. 7 Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8 I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.

George Mueller wrote, "There was a day when I died, utterly died to George Mueller and his opinions, his preferences, and his tastes and his will. I died to the world, to its approval and its censure. I died to the approval or the blame of even my brethren and friends. And since then, I have studied only to show myself approved unto God."

The next time you are hurt by another Christian remember these steps. Go to the person who has hurt you first in an attitude of humility seeking peace. If you cannot find resolution then bring in a neutral third party who can help to mediate the dispute. If there is still no resolution and the situation has the potential of harming the church then involve the leadership.