

Handling Conflict Without Hurting Each Other

Matthew 18:15–20

Most family conflict doesn't begin with some enormous crisis. It begins with the dishwasher. Somebody being late. Clothes left somewhere they shouldn't be. A text that sounded different than you meant it. Who forgot to do what. The thermostat. The sentence, “I thought you were going to...”

And then somehow, five minutes later, the conversation isn't about the dishwasher anymore.

I'll be honest with you: I've had moments where somewhere in the middle of a disagreement, I realize I'm not actually trying to solve anything anymore. I'm trying to prove that I'm right. And when that happens, something shifts. The person I love quietly becomes the opponent. The question changes from “How do we work this out?” to “How do I win?”

Now, be honest: on a scale of 1 to 5 – with 1 being “nearly instantly” and 5 being “almost never,” how quickly do you go from disagreeing to defending? Just raise your fingers, or online, put a number in the comment section. ... There's a range of responses, but that it is a challenge not to become defensive when we experience conflict with another person. And that's often because we don't want to feel like we are being attacking or losing, so we defend. It's that fight or flight instinct that kicks in and causes us to want to “win” the argument.

Jesus gives us a radically different definition of winning. Let's see what it is.

Every real relationship eventually experiences conflict. If you never disagree with someone, one of two things is probably true — either you don't know each other very well, or somebody isn't being honest.

Families develop their own ways of handling it. Some people attack. Some withdraw. Some go silent and insist they're “fine” when they're anything but. Some recruit allies — texting a friend or a parent to build their case before they've even talked

to the person involved. Some store up grievances until one small disagreement suddenly contains everything that's gone wrong since 2019.

This isn't just a hunch — researchers have actually measured it. Psychologist John Gottman spent decades at the University of Washington observing thousands of couples in conflict, and identified four communication patterns so destructive he named them “the Four Horsemen”: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Watching just fifteen minutes of a couple in conflict, his research team could predict divorce with over ninety percent accuracy — and contempt, he found, was the single strongest predictor of all.

In other words: it's not conflict itself that destroys relationships. It's what we do with it. Attack, withdraw, recruit, stockpile — and eventually, in a culture where people can be unfriended, blocked, ghosted, or written off with one tap, the easiest option becomes simply: I'm done.

But Matthew 18 comes from a very different vision of what people are worth.

Just before this passage, Jesus tells a story about a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep to go after the one that wandered off. That's not an accident. Jesus tells that story, and then immediately teaches what to do when one person hurts another. The message underneath both is the same: to God, one person is always worth going after.

So the real question this morning isn't simply “How do we resolve conflict?” It's this: How do people who believe no one is disposable handle it when somebody gets hurt?

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” — Matthew 18:15

Notice what Jesus assumes: harm happens. Christian community is not conflict-free community. And notice what Jesus doesn't say. He doesn't say pretend it didn't happen. He doesn't say keep smiling. He doesn't say let it go immediately, whether or not it's actually been dealt with. He says: tell the truth about it. But then he gives us a carefully graduated process for how.

1 · GO TO THE PERSON

The first word is GO. Move toward the person, not away from them. That alone runs against most of our instincts — we want to vent, find someone who agrees with us, rehearse what happened, build our case. Jesus says: go to the person. Talk to people, not about people. Go small before you go public.

2 · TELL THE TRUTH WITHOUT ATTACKING THE PERSON

“Point out the fault” doesn't mean tell them what kind of terrible person they are. It means bring the actual issue into the light. There's an enormous difference between “You are so selfish” and “When this happened, I felt ignored and hurt.” One attacks identity. The other names behavior and impact. Describe what happened before you decide what it says about the person.

3 · REMEMBER WHAT WINNING MEANS

“If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.” — Matthew 18:15

Ask yourself what Jesus calls success here. Not: they admitted you were right. Not: they apologized exactly the way you wanted. Not: everyone found out what really happened. Not: you got the last word. Jesus says simply — you regained the person. That doesn't mean every relationship can or should return to exactly what it was. But it sets the posture: I am not trying to defeat you. I am trying to find a way toward truth, and if possible, toward one another.

4 · WHEN NECESSARY, WIDEN THE CIRCLE CAREFULLY

If the first conversation doesn't work, Jesus says to bring one or two others. But look closely — these people aren't reinforcements. They're not “my two friends who already agree you're wrong.” This echoes an old principle from Deuteronomy, where witnesses exist to establish truth and protect against one-sided accusations. These are wise, trustworthy reconcilers — a pastor, a counselor, a mature friend, a mediator. Bring reconcilers, not reinforcements.

5 · LOVE SOMETIMES REQUIRES BOUNDARIES

The hardest verse in this passage says that if the person still refuses to listen, eventually the relationship changes — Jesus says to treat them “as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Don't read that as throw them away. But don't soften it into nothing has consequences, either. Both are true at once: love does not require pretending nothing happened, and boundaries do not mean someone is beyond grace. Even Jesus, remember, spent his ministry eating with tax collectors and welcoming Gentiles — the very people this verse names. So this is closer to: acknowledge the brokenness, set necessary boundaries, refuse false peace, and keep the door open to repentance. Christian love does not mean unlimited access. Sometimes love protects, limits, and waits.

And here's an important word I don't want to rush past: this passage was never meant to require someone to sit down privately with a person who is abusive, violent, coercive, or dangerous. If you are in a situation like that, Jesus is not asking you to put yourself in harm's way for the sake of reconciliation. Safety, professional help, and appropriate authorities come first — always. Forgiveness does not automatically restore access, trust, or relationship. Reconciliation requires truth, repentance, safety, and rebuilt trust, and sometimes that rebuilding never becomes safe to attempt. If that's you this morning, hear this clearly: you are not failing this passage by protecting yourself.

6 · JESUS IS IN THE DIFFICULT ROOM

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” — Matthew 18:20

We usually quote that verse about small attendance at a Bible study. But look at the context — Jesus says it right after describing conflict, accountability, and restoration. He's telling us: I am not only present when everything feels spiritual and harmonious. I am with you in the awkward conversation. In the counselor's office. Around the kitchen table. In the meeting where somebody finally tells the truth. In the painful process of figuring out what a faithful boundary looks like. Jesus is not only with us when everyone is singing in harmony. He is with us when two wounded people sit across a table and ask, how do we find our way forward?

Why would we ever move toward the person who hurt us instead of away from them? Because that is how God has always moved toward us. The shepherd goes after the wandering sheep. Grace doesn't pretend sin doesn't matter — grace enters brokenness in order to heal it.

A daughter sent her father a text asking whether he can help with a home repair. He replied, “I’m busy. You always expect me to fix everything.” She felt rejected and told her spouse, “Dad doesn’t care about helping me anymore.”

Instead of allowing the resentment to grow, she called him and said: “When I read your message, I heard that I was a burden to you. Did I understand what you meant?”

Her father explained he was stressed at work and meant only that he could not help that evening. He apologized for the sharp wording. She acknowledged that she often does ask him for help without checking his availability first. They agreed that urgent requests will be made by phone and that routine projects will be scheduled ahead of time.

Many conflicts are not caused by what was said alone, but by the story we tell ourselves about what was meant. Go to the person and clarify before building a case around an interpretation. In seeking to restore the relationship, they let each person explain the situation, identified its impact, and agreed on a concrete repair going forward.

Two adult siblings disagree about where their aging Mom should spend Thanksgiving. One believes Mom should stay home; the other thinks traveling to a larger family gathering would be better. Each begins discussing the other’s selfishness with relatives.

One sibling eventually decides to call the other and says, “We have been talking about each other instead of talking with each other. Could we start over and focus on what Mom needs?”

They make a list of Mom’s concerns: fatigue, loneliness, transportation, and desire to see grandchildren. They decide on a shorter visit at home, with relatives rotating responsibilities and bringing the meal.

Dealing with a conflict often requires separating the person from the problem, using “I” statements, staying with the issue at hand, and working for solutions together.

A church committee needed to decide whether to spend money repairing an old sign or replacing it. Two members become increasingly tense. One says the other is careless with money; the other says the first member is afraid of every change.

The chairperson first meets with each person privately, then invites them to speak together. The chair sets three guidelines:

1. Describe what happened without labeling one another.
2. Explain why the matter matters to you.
3. Listen for the concern beneath the position.

They discover that one person is concerned about stewardship, while the other is concerned about welcoming visitors and accessibility. They agree to obtain two repair estimates and a replacement estimate, then revisit the decision with the congregation’s mission and finances in view.

When private conversation does not settle the matter, carefully chosen others can help establish truth and restore a shared purpose. The additional people are not an audience or a prosecution team; they are witnesses and helpers. Christian conflict resolution is not about recruiting supporters; it is about inviting the right people to help the community tell the truth in love.

In all of these conflict examples, we see the people in conflict moving toward one another, rather than abandoning each other. ***We move toward one another because God has moved toward us.***

So what does this look like this week? Not a personality overhaul — a five-step pattern you can actually use. PAUSE. GO. SPEAK. LISTEN. REPAIR.

PAUSE. Before you respond at maximum emotion, ask yourself: what am I actually trying to accomplish here — win, punish, vent, prove, or restore? A simple prayer helps: “God, help me care about this person more than I care about winning.”

GO. Go directly to the person. Before you talk to anyone else about it, ask yourself honestly: have I actually spoken to them yet? Gossip cannot substitute for relationship.

SPEAK. Start with one issue — not the entire history of your marriage, your childhood, or the committee. Try “When this happened...” instead of “You always...”

LISTEN. Ask, “Can you help me understand what you meant?” Listening doesn't mean agreeing, and it doesn't mean deciding no harm occurred. It means being willing to hear someone's experience before you render the final verdict.

REPAIR. When you were wrong, name it, own it, and don't excuse it. “I was wrong. I hurt you. I'm sorry. What can I do to begin making this right?” — not “I'm sorry you felt that way,” and not “I'm sorry, but...”

Last week, our practice was CONNECT. This week, it's TALK: have one restorative conversation. Go into it with a single goal — I want us to understand each other better, and if possible, I want us to find our way toward each other.

Imagine homes where conflict doesn't automatically mean rejection. Where children watch their parents say, “I was wrong.” Where teenagers know they can tell the truth without losing their family. Where adult children and aging parents can talk about hard things. Where spouses can disagree without the relationship feeling threatened every time. Where friendship survives disappointment.

And imagine a church that lives that way. When somebody is hurt, we don't gather teams. We don't whisper in hallways. We don't send anonymous attacks. We don't treat people as disposable. We go. We tell the truth. We listen. We ask for help when we need it. We set healthy boundaries when necessary. And we keep hoping for redemption.

At Monroe UMC, let's become people who speak to one another, not about one another.

Family Strong doesn't mean family never hurts. It doesn't mean we never misunderstand each other. It doesn't mean everybody always gets along. It means that when conflict comes, we remember something Jesus never wants us to forget: the person

across from you is not disposable. So we don't begin with gossip. We don't begin with humiliation. We don't begin by gathering a team. We go. We tell the truth in love. We listen. We seek help when we need it. We set boundaries when truth and safety require them. And whenever possible, we seek to regain one another — because the goal was never winning the argument. The goal is regaining the relationship. And Jesus makes one more promise: when we enter that difficult room in his name, he is already there.

Strong families aren't families that never struggle. They're families that learn how to struggle without giving up on love.

Let's pray: Jesus, thank you that you go after the one who wanders. Teach us to go toward each other instead of away. Where we've been quick to attack, slow us down. Where we've gone silent, give us courage to speak. Where we've been keeping score, teach us to seek restoration instead. For those carrying a conversation they've been avoiding — give them courage this week. For those in situations where safety, not reconciliation, must come first — protect them, and remind them that boundaries are not a failure of faith. Thank you that you are present in the hard conversations, not just the easy ones. In your name, Amen.

One question to carry into the week: *Is there someone I need to go to, rather than go around?*

Sources & Notes

John Gottman's "Four Horsemen" research (criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling) and its correlation with divorce prediction — The Gottman Institute; summarized via multiple secondary sources including South Denver Therapy and HuffPost Life coverage of Gottman's "Love Lab" research at the University of Washington.

Joe Avila and the Wall family reconciliation story — Prison Fellowship, "Joe And Amy: A Story of Reconciliation," prisonfellowship.org (July 2021).

Exegetical framework — restorative reading of Matthew 18:15–20, Deuteronomy 19:15 witness principle, and the pastoral distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation — drawn from the Week 2 exegetical revision and the Family Strong Preaching & Series Overview.