

Today's gospel is often called the Dissertation on the Church. In the section we have in today's Gospel, Jesus instructs his disciples on how to care for those who turn from Him, turn from the Church. I am going to explore six rules of conflict based on today's gospel text.

The first rule of conflict – Seek to reconcile, not revile

Our natural reaction when someone hurts us or breaks the rules of the community is to retaliate and punish. Many times this passage has been used as justification for excommunication. But consider this. Directly after today's gospel Peter asks, "How often should I forgive my brother?" Jesus says, "always forgive."

Our passage about conflict is smothered in the principle that we should always seek reconciliation and community.

The rest of the rules will show us how to do that.

The second rule of conflict – Start private, not public.

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. Let's make this plain and simple. Whatever you do, DON'T GOSSIP. There's an old story about a man in a small village who was known as a gossip.

The people were really upset about it and they asked the wise sage of the village to deal with it. So the wise sage took the man aside and gave him a bag of feathers. He told him to go spread those feathers all over the village and then come back the next morning.

The man did as he was told, he spread the feathers all over the place and then came back the next morning.

The sage told him to go and gather up all the feathers that he had dropped the day before.

"But sir," the man said, "that's impossible. The wind has spread my feathers everywhere, I couldn't possibly get them all back."

"exactly," the wise man said, "and so it is when you gossip and spread rumours about others. You can never take it back."

Pope Francis has repeatedly spoken against gossip. So we are instructed to go alone and deal with the person.

The third rule of conflict – Stay in community, for community

"But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church."

It is important to note here that you don't bring other people to gang up on the offender. You bring others in to ensure that the words you are saying are proper and seek to restore the offender to community.

The fourth rule – don't compromise standards

"if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

Sometimes there is a danger when we emphasize love and community so much. Many times it may seem like we are supposed to just gloss over blatant sin and call it love. That is dangerous.

Let's use an example to illustrate this. Anyone who has been involved with a loved one who struggles with addiction knows the phrases "intervention" and "tough love." Sometimes you can do everything in your power to help someone see that what they are doing is hurting themselves and hurting you, but it doesn't change them. You can't lower the standards and allow the person to keep hurting you or the church and pretend like nothing is wrong. You have to grieve that loss. So if a person is living in an abusive situation, this gospel calls them to leave the situation and us to support them.

The fifth rule – grieve the loss of intimacy, but always pursue restoration

"let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

At the beginning of the passage it says, "if a member of the church sins against you."

Literally it says "if a brother or sister sins against you." This is a person who is close to you in relationship.

When the brother or sister is unrepentant you lose intimacy. The closeness is gone.

They bounce off the door of conflict and drift back into the realm of casual acquaintance. They are just like all the other Gentiles, tax collectors, and strangers.

That hurts. That is a loss. That must be grieved.

But here's the question that must be asked...

How does Jesus treat the Gentile and the tax collector? He loves them, pursues them, and gives his life for them. If a conflict comes to this point where someone is lost from the community, that is not a victory. This is a loss, for everyone. The body is incomplete without all its parts.

The sixth rule – be Jesus to the world

Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

This is one of those passages that gets wildly used and interpreted.

When I was growing up I always had a distorted view of this. I always thought it was, "where two or three are gathered together, there is conflict in the midst of them." In the context of Matthew 18, however, I think Jesus is simply reminding his disciples of one simple truth.

"Remember, you represent me in the world. Never ask who is the greatest among you.

Always go after the little ones and the lost sheep. That is what we are all about."

The mark of a great church is one that knows how to handle conflict the Jesus Way.

Otherwise, why would the Scriptures give such a clear way about how to live in community?

Let's face it, when people try to live together in community it gets messy and conflict happens.

Let us conclude by praying together our Parish Vision Prayer.

Heavenly Father, by the power of your Holy Spirit,
we the faithful of Corpus Christi Parish,
ask that you bless and sanctify us as we work together to implement our Vision. We
ask that you guide us we strive to love bravely, to serve radically and to meet all whose
we encounter with humility and compassion. Help us to unite joyfully and lovingly as
followers of your Son, Jesus, to take his message with us wherever we go.
We know that by your grace, we can make this Vision a reality.
We ask this in the name of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.