



**Gyroscopic Grace**

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**Matthew 18:15-20**

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Those of you who have a smartphone or a tablet understand this: no matter how you twist and turn the phone or tablet, the screen twists and turns with you, so your screen is always upright. What allows your phone or tablet to keep everything right-side up is a gyroscope. You don't have to do anything to keep the screen upright – the gyroscope does it automatically for you.

Wouldn't it be nice, if, no matter how turned around things got in life, there was always a way to get right-side up?

In our scripture passage today, Jesus urges us to keep our relationships right-side up. The only problem is that, unlike our smartphones and iPads, we don't have a built-in gyroscope making it automatic and easy. We're going to see that God gives us something we might call "gyroscopic grace" that unfailingly, and without any merit of our own, rights us back up with God.

But getting *right with each other*, that's another story.

☞ Before we read what Jesus has to say, let's pray. In power and truth, we invite you to come, Holy Spirit. Impart to us the Word that we may hear, understand, believe and obediently respond. For the sake of Christ, we pray. Amen.

☞ Read Matthew 18:15-20 (Talk about why I added "against you.") As I read, keep in mind this passage is from the lectionary for today, and is part of our theme for the year where Jesus says *love one another as I have loved you*.

Many of us have favorite scripture verses we love to quote because they mean so much to us. But sometimes when you take verses out of context, they lose some of their original meaning and can sometimes be harmful. Our passage today is

one of those. I grew up being taught that this passage where Jesus talks about taking action against someone who sins against you is about church discipline. Many have used it as a way to get rid of someone who is particularly difficult in the church.

However, if you pay attention to what's around it, in other words, the context this passage is placed in, the meaning begins to shift away from church discipline.

Another example of taking a verse out of context, and thereby changing its original meaning, is also in our scripture passage today. Jesus says if two or more agree in prayer about anything, it will be given to them.

How many of you have prayed with someone and you agree in prayer together, and your prayer wasn't answered the way you asked? I know people who struggle with this verse and have stopped praying because they didn't experience what this passage says. But if you put it in context, it comes right after the story about the community coming together to deal with conflict or sin. Is this verse on prayer connected to conflict resolution?

Let's find out.

In the family of God (in the church), people get sideways with one another; in other words, there is conflict. Sometimes, it's over trivial things, such as the color of new carpet in the sanctuary. There are snarky comments made at meetings and all kinds of disagreements about how things should be done. It is inevitable. We are all broken. It happens in every church. If you try to get away from a dispute in one church, you will find a dispute in another.

Jesus knows this and tells us what to do when someone wrongs us or hurts us or sins against us.

Jesus says go. Don't sit on it or ignore it or let it fester, but go to that person. Go...not to others to seek advice, not to others to gossip, not to start a letter writing campaign, not to avoid them and un-friend them on Facebook, but go directly to that person. And I suggest not writing an email, but go directly face to face. And you will see why in a few minutes.

I have to tell you, I find this passage pretty scary because I am preaching to myself today. I am a nice, polite, Midwestern, Minnesota girl. You heard about “Minnesota Nice,” right? Well, we don’t confront people face-to-face when they wrong us, we go behind their back! Because, we don’t want to hurt them. There are all kinds of Midwestern people not speaking to one another and nobody knows why.

And I must admit another reason why this passage scares me is because I wonder if I will have a line of people outside my door whom I have wronged waiting to confront me! So, I am approaching this with fear and trembling today.

Jesus says, not only go, but go you self. It’s incredibly tempting to make others aware how someone has wronged us. It feels so good when we do that. But Jesus says “no!” Go directly to that person.

God has extended to you his grace, his gyroscopic grace which makes your relationship with God right-side up. Because it has been extended to you and me, go and do it with you brother and sister in Christ. Extend forgiveness and reconciliation because it has been given to you first.

You will find, by taking this first step, most of the time you will not need to go to the second step that Jesus gives. Often, the person doesn’t know that they have hurt you or sinned against you. And when they find out, you both can make it right.

However, if they do not listen or are not repentant, then Jesus says bring several more with you to get things right-side up. And if that doesn’t work, there is a third step, a last resort, which is rare. This is the case where the sin is probably more serious. You bring in the whole church .

So these are the details that Jesus outlines on what to do when someone has wronged you. But here’s why this is not about church discipline. Let’s pull back

and do what I said earlier: look at this passage in context. In other words, where is it placed in this chapter?

Right before our passage, Jesus gives a parable about a lost sheep, and the shepherd does everything he can to bring that stray sheep back into the fold. And there is much rejoicing when it happens.

After our scripture passage, Jesus talks about forgiveness, and there is the famous passage of forgiving seven times seventy. In other words, always.

Our passage is not about church discipline at all. It's about reconciliation. Of bringing others back into the fold. Of forgiving because of God's gyroscopic grace which is extended to us and we extend to others, so relationships will be made right side up.

Well then, what about the part where Jesus says if the person doesn't listen after going through the steps: "treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector." The Jews had nothing to do with these people. They ignored them. They turned their backs on them.

We need to consider the source. Who is speaking these words? How did Jesus treat the tax collector, the gentile? He spoke with them, he listened to them, he invited them, he ate with them (even in the "sinful" person's home), he healed them. One of them even became one of the 12 disciples – a tax collector. Matthew.

*The Message* translation gets this right. Where it says "treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector," *The Message* says, "If he won't listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love." This is not about getting rid of someone in the church; it's about reconciliation.

Jesus goes on and tells why reconciliation is so vital to the Christian life. There is that strange sentence that says what we bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and what we loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. What in the world does that mean?

I am not completely sure, but I think it means that reconciliation is so important that whatever we decide in conflict situations, the effects of that decision will extend even into heaven itself. I don't know how this works, but there is synchronicity between heaven and earth, between our actions and God's actions. Therefore, we need to be wise in our actions, our decisions and judgments.

We need to be wise because of what Jesus says next. Jesus seems to move on to a new subject – one of prayer: when two or more agree in prayer, Jesus says, I will give them anything they ask. And not only that, the presence of Jesus is there.

This is not a new topic. It is connected to going to the person who has sinned against you. This promise of answered prayer and this promise of the presence of Jesus happens during the process of reconciliation. And therefore, reconciliation is holy.

When you go to the person who has wounded you (I am not talking sending an email, but talking face to face), as you talk and hopefully pray together, Jesus is present answering your prayer, and the place of reconciliation becomes sacred ground. Do you see how important this is? It's something that we need to practice until it is so ingrained in our DNA, we can't imagine living another way.

Who do you need to reconcile with? Is God bringing a name to you this morning? Go.

As Christians, we believe that Christ is reconciling the whole world to God. So when two Christians take their conflict as an opportunity to practice reconciliation, it becomes a sign of what Christ is doing in the world: an outward and visible sign of gyroscopic grace.

Let us pray that God will give us (me included) the courage to practice reconciliation. Amen