

Shipwrecked

By Pastor Greg
9-21-08

Matthew 18:15-17

Bunkertown COB

Two men began to argue one day while aboard a ship at sea. That night the ship wrecked during a storm and only these two men survived. They swam to a small, deserted island and, because of the argument, moved to opposite sides of the island. Not knowing what else to do, each decided to pray. The first thing they prayed for was food. The next morning, the first man saw a fruit-bearing tree on his side of the land. The other man's parcel of land remained barren.

After some days, the first man was lonely and he decided to pray for a wife. The next day, another ship was wrecked, and the only survivor was a woman who swam to his side of the island. On the other side of the island, the second man had nothing. Soon the first man prayed for a house, clothes, and more food. The next day, like magic, all of these were given to him. However, the second man still had nothing.

Finally, the first man prayed to be rescued. In the morning, he found a ship docked at his side on the island. This man boarded the ship with his wife and decided to leave the other man behind. But as the ship was about to leave, the first man heard a voice from heaven booming: "Why are you leaving your companion on the island?" "His prayers were all unanswered and so he does not deserve anything", said the man. "You are mistaken," the voice said. "He had only one prayer, which I answered." "Tell me," the first man asked, "what did he pray for?" The voice replied, "He prayed that all your prayers be answered."

Early on in the book of Matthew, Jesus teaches His followers to, "love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!"¹ (Matthew 5:44). And why is that? Because according to Jesus our relationship with others is very important. Not only are we to love those who love us, but to love those who anger us; to pray for those who have wronged us. But sadly, this is a lesson many Christians fail to learn. And what's interesting is that some Christians are more willing to pray for an enemy

¹Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

they've never met (some Muslim extremist), than they are for their brother or sister who has offended them.

We have been studying chapter 18 of Matthew's gospel. If you'll recall, He has been teaching His disciples the importance of loving God and loving others. He has called us to serve others, to lift up one another. He tells us to remain teachable and to consider how our actions may affect one another. And then He passes along this teaching beginning in verse 15. ¹⁵ "If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. ¹⁶ But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won't accept the church's decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector."² (Matthew 18:15-17)

At first glance, it appears Jesus wants us to force someone to say I'm sorry. And if they will not, then we have ammunition we can use against them. But to me, the typical interpretation of this text feels more like a scalpel designed to cut and wound rather than as a suture designed to join and heal. And I know many people use this text as grounds for church discipline. Some churches actually excommunicate members because they failed to follow the rules. The offender is shunned because they have acted in a worldly manner. Their reasoning is that according to this scripture they must stop associating with an individual because they've acted like a pagan or tax collector. But that is so unlike Jesus. He associated with the people of this world repeatedly. So this passage of scripture needs to be understood in light of who Jesus is and what He has been teaching all along.

These verses in Matthew come right in the middle of His teaching about the importance of relationships. He's been telling His disciples to stoop so that they may serve others (first shall be last). He's told them to consider how their actions may be perceived by others (causing another to stumble). And then He gives this teaching here on reconciliation, as if this is what should happen when our actions do cause another to stumble in their faith.

²Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

Here you have an example of two Christians whose relationship has been wounded. Apparently, something has happened to drive a wedge between them. Because loving relationships are so very important to God, the Christian who has been offended seeks to restore that which is broken. If he finds this unsuccessful, he then asks others to help with the healing process, not bring along an army of lawyers who are on his side of the issue. Remember, the important thing is restoration, not who is right or wrong. If that doesn't work, then the whole church should get involved, not to decide who is acting like the sinner, but to take every measure to heal the wound between these two people.

Although Jesus instructs us to go to the person in hopes of restoring the relationship, too many of us do not. Too many of us would rather gripe and complain to people who are not involved with the conflict at all. When someone offends us or wrongs us, we unload our pain on everyone else except the one we need to be talking to in the first place. And sadly, our actions demonstrate that we do not care one bit about the other person, we only care about our own feelings. Our failure to seek restoration says that their relationship was never important to us in the first place. And that we are more interested in having our wounds heard than in healed. According to John the Apostle it actually says we are still walking in darkness (“**But anyone who hates another brother or sister is still living and walking in darkness.**”³ 1 John 2:11).

There is another side to this teaching that most of us miss - the role we play in helping others heal. As a family of believers, our responsibility is to help people heal, not solve their problems for them. As a family, it is our responsibility to bring the two broken parties together for restoration, not set and listen to them complain about how they have been hurt. Nor should we act as their emissary. It is wrong for us to go to another person and tell them how they have offended someone without bringing along the one who is hurting. Because if we merely act as the bearer of pain, we are only making the wound worse. The important thing is to heal what is broken, says Jesus, not point out who is right and who is wrong.

³Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

This isn't the way we should be treating one another. We should value our relationships so much that we desire to heal the rift that has grown between ourselves and another person. But if we gripe and complain to others about how we have been offended and wronged, how does that solve the broken relationship? If I offend you and yet you never talk to me about it, how can the two of us work things out? Unloading your hurt on to others only passes along YOUR pain. It does nothing to make things right.

So where does this leave us when a fellow believer refuses to heal a broken relationship? After every attempt to make things right has failed, Jesus says to treat them as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector. And what does that mean? Since this person has refused every attempt to be restored, there apparently is no love in them for a fellow believer. And a person who refuses to heal a broken relationship demonstrates there is no Christian love in them. And if there is no Christian love in them then apparently they are still living and walking in darkness. And if they are still living and walking in darkness, how then ought we to be treating them? Certainly not drive them away from God, but we treat them as if they have never come to know God, and take the necessary steps to help them understand how a child of God ought to love others. Yes, even with this person, our ultimate goal is to restore them back to God and to the rest of the family of believers.

When a relationship between two believers falls apart, it becomes shipwrecked. And standing around complaining about the wreck does nothing to fix the problem. To be rescued is the primary goal. And I believe we Christians need to see just how important it is to God that we heal instead of divide.