

Doing the right thing can be so hard. It becomes significantly harder to do right when we've been wronged. It is not difficult to find stories that illustrate this mess in history and in our own lives.

There is a National Historic Site in the Outer Banks of North Carolina called Fort Raleigh.<sup>i</sup> As the site of multiple English settlements from 1584 to 1590, more than thirty years before the Pilgrims reached the shore in Plymouth, Fort Raleigh is known as "England's first home in the new world".<sup>ii</sup> It may have been the first home, but it wasn't a peaceful home.

The first voyage launched in 1584 with seven ships, thirteen cannons, and thousands of pounds of gunpowder. Captain Richard Grenville was a hard man. He liked to show off his toughness by eating broken glass. When the fleet was forced to stop in Puerto Rico to repair the ships after a storm, Grenville plundered Puerto Rican salt supplies and raided their ships.

Most of what was gained from Puerto Rico was lost when the fleet's largest ship, the *Tiger*, ran aground and lost the majority of the supplies to the sea. While the crew worked to repair the ship and save what supplies they could, Grenville ventured with Ralph Lane, who was appointed to be governor of the colony, and several dozen men in the smaller boats to scout out the land. With the loss of supplies the settlers would have to depend on good relations with the native Algonquian people.

Grenville's aggression quickly troubled those good relations. He noticed that a silver cup was missing from his bag. This does not have a happy ending like the Biblical story of Joseph and his brothers. He assumed it was taken by the native people in a village he visited. He returned and demanded that they produce the cup. When they didn't, he ordered his men to burn the village and the surrounding crops. What I want to highlight in this story is the mess we make when we do the wrong thing. Burning a village was the wrong thing to do.

While some natives fearfully continued to help the English, the warrior chief Wingina was determined to get rid of the settlers. With the region experiencing a drought the white men were a threat to the dwindling food supply. Wingina refused to trade with them or supply them with food. Wingina became more determined to destroy the white men when he saw that they were spreading deadly diseases to every tribe they visited. He directed his men to cut the settlers' fishing nets. Was that wrong? It's debatable. But Wingina took things further.

The settlers decided to make temporary shelter on Roanoke Island, the site of Fort Raleigh National Historic site, while they continued to look for a permanent place to settle. Grenville returned to England to bring much needed supplies, leaving Lane with 100 men. When Wingina learned that the settlers were moving further inland to find a permanent settlement he came up with a plan. He sent word to his rival tribes that the white men were coming to kill them and suggested they strike preemptively. He sent a similar message to Lane and his men in hopes that the two rivals would wipe each other out. That wasn't nice.

When his deception failed he began planning a night time attack on the settlers at Roanoke. The white men had done his people wrong. Wingina wasn't afraid to do wrong back.

Governor Lane learned of the plan. He arranged a meeting of negotiation with Wingina. When they met, one of the settlers shot and killed Wingina, surprising everyone but Lane who had given the orders. More wrong.

The settlers retreated to Roanoke knowing that they would soon be attacked by natives seeking revenge. After a tense week of constant suspense, they saw a fleet. In a streak of good fortune they signaled the ships and boarded with the crew of Sir Frances Drake who was returning to England. They were able to join his crew and escape the war they had created.

Two weeks later, Grenville returned with three supply ships. Not knowing where the settlers had gone, Grenville left 15 soldiers to man the fort with supplies to last two years. Those 15 men had no idea what they were getting into. They did not know that the area was experiencing drought. They didn't know that they had stepped into a warzone and that the native people would be coming after them to seek revenge for something they didn't do.

The natives came. They attacked the village and burned the fort to the ground. The men boarded the boats and fled the island for their lives. What a mess. England's first home in the new world was a troubled home. Their failed attempts to settle are a reminder that returning wrong for wrong never turns out right.

There are countless tragic stories of wrongs that have been done. The sequel to many of those stories is a wrong response that adds to the pain. The history of Fort Raleigh tells one such story. Each of us have experienced our own. It would be nice to avoid that mess. But how do you do right when you've been wronged?

There is no simple formula. There are, however, two sentences of practical instruction on this topic that are packed with wisdom and stand out in clarity. They were said by Jesus and recorded in Matthew 18:15.

Here they are...

Matthew 18:15 Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.

Take in the wisdom phrase by phrase. The first seven words set up the situation in which these instructions most directly apply.

**Moreover** if your brother sins against you...

This word connects these two sentences to a larger context. It is a continued thought. We will come back to this point.

Moreover if **your brother** sins against you...

It matters who does you wrong. These two sentences apply to brothers. Although the Greek word can refer to male siblings, it is not limited to that. The majority of the uses of this word refer to "the brethren", that is fellow believers<sup>iii</sup>. Once it is used to refer to a "believing husband" (1 Corinthians 7:14). In Matthew 18:15, Jesus was not referring to siblings but to believers.

If they are not a fellow believer, your response might be different. If it is an oppressive government that wrongs you, the right response might be to pray for those who persecute you and to be faithful to the point of death<sup>iv</sup>. If it is a stranger who cuts you off, the right response might be to get over it. When Jesus said to turn the other cheek, he was talking about not resisting "evil people". He was offering an alternative to taking an eye for an eye<sup>v</sup>. We should expect an evil person to sin. We should expect sin from fellow believers too. But since they share our value of living in the Holy Spirit, we should expect their hearts to be repentant.

The Bible does have wisdom for how to do right when we are wronged by an unbeliever. That is not what Matthew 18:15 is about.

Moreover if your brother **sins** against you...

It matters what they do. These two sentences don't apply to mere annoyances. They tell the right thing to do when the wrong thing can be called "sin". These are wrongs that cause you to sincerely worry about the spiritual health of the one who did them. The Bible is full of wisdom for lesser offenses (i.e. "A gentle answer turns away wrath..." Proverbs 15:1).

The process that follows verse 15 is serious. It involves other people and the church and eventually considering the person an unbeliever. It would be so wrong to go through that process if the offense was not sin. I may personally not prefer a style of worship, approve of the pants my friend wore to church, or agree with a perspective of another church member. This is not sin. This should not involve others and risk division in the church.

The corrective actions we take must be appropriate to the level of the offense. If you have been wronged, but you can't call it sin, the right response may be to overlook the offense.<sup>vi</sup> Matthew 18:15 applies when the offense is sin.

Moreover if your brother sins **against you**...

Matthew 18 refers to personal offenses, not something you heard someone did to someone. This is not a job description for a Sin Police. This is not about searching for sin in the lives of church members. We don't have to call out every sin we see. It is personal connection that puts us in a position to confront sin. If you don't have a personal connection, don't confront their sin.

They might need to be rescued. But if they don't know you and you come armed, they are not going to assume you are there to help them.

God does use believers to hold us spiritually accountable. Notice the extreme care that is needed for such situations.

Ephesians 6:1 says, Brothers *and sisters*, even if a person is caught in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual are to restore such a person in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, so that you are not tempted as well.

Are we gaining any insight yet on how to do right when we've been wronged? So far Jesus has described the situation of how we've been wronged. Now he tells us the right thing to do about it.

...**go and tell** him his fault between you and him alone...

These are encouraging words. They are verbs, actions for us to take. When Jesus said, "If your brother sins against you..." his next words were a call to action not a lament about their action to you. This means that we can do something about it. We are not helpless victims whose wellbeing hangs on the hope that the one doing us wrong will choose to do right. They may have wronged us. We get to choose our response. Their wrong cannot prevent us from doing right.

Our focus should not be on their wrong action but on our right reaction. You can't take control of their wrong action. You can take responsibility for your right reaction. No matter how bad the

situation, there is always a Christlike next step for us to take. There is not always an easy option but there is always a right option. Put all your energy into that step. Don't believe that you must be paralyzed by the wrongs done to you.

...go and tell **him his fault** between you and him alone...

Where do you go? To "him", the person who sinned against you.

What do you tell them? Their faults! I personally prefer to go around the issue. I might give some soft hints or passive aggressive comments in hope that they will get it. I might try to minimize the issues so I can avoid discomfort while my resentment of the wrong simultaneously grows. I just hope they will see their error, repent, and change their ways without me actually having to confront them. After all, maybe I am overreacting. And, who am I to tell them that they have sinned? I am a sinner too. What I need to do is stop justifying my wrong and cowardly reaction to their sin. They are not going to get it. They are not going to change. They need a friend who loves them enough to expose their sin. The Greek word translated "tell" can mean rebuke, reprove, discipline, show to be guilty, expose, or convict.<sup>vii</sup> It is done in love, but not in weakness.

We are good at detecting wrong when it is done to us. When someone has an issue with us and they talk to others about it, we are offended and ask, "Why didn't you just tell me?"

There are many resources you can find to develop skills in having difficult conversations and confronting without offending<sup>viii</sup>. We can get the tools we need to do the right thing. Our excuses will dissolve when we value doing the right thing more than we value feeling comfortable.

I've told people these things before, and I've received pushback. It went something like this, "Pastor, you are naïve. I cannot confront him (or her). They will destroy me. They will never listen. It is not safe." I realize that there are tricky situations. We need to be prayerful, careful, and set appropriate boundaries. But we must not let our fear of the situation cause us to doubt the positive outcome of doing the right thing. If the situation meets the qualifications that Jesus described in Matthew 18:15 then we should follow the instruction he gave. Ask yourself, "Is it sin?", "Are they a believer?" and "Do I want to restore this?". If you can say yes to those questions, then it is right for you to confront. Be smart. Take precautions. Go and tell the person their faults.

...go and tell him his fault **between you and him alone**...

Keep sin small! Right reactions keep the impact of sin as small as possible. If we go to their sister, pastor, or ex-girlfriend we spread the impact of the sin to them and we launch sin back on the one who wronged us. There is a place to bring others in. It is not the first step, and it is never done out of carelessness, cowardice or revenge. When we don't yet have the courage to talk to them, we should have the respect to not talk to others about them. Gossip magnifies sin. We want to keep sin small.

If nothing else changed in the church but that we got this one thing right, each local congregation would easily be double the size it is today. Sure, many have left because they have been sinned against. Many others are gone because when they sinned against their brother, their brother didn't keep the sin as small as possible. They gossiped. They built their case. They talked to everyone but the person they should have talked to. It hurt. It broke trust. That church was no longer a safe place for that sinner. That's why we don't see them at church

today. I am not exaggerating. Our inability to follow the first step of reconciliation in Matthew 18 has shipwrecked the faith of thousands. We must talk about sin. We must stop talking about it in the wrong circles. When we have the right conversation with the wrong person, we do wrong by everyone involved. We don't struggle to talk about sin. We struggle to talk about it with the right people.

"...**If he hears you**, you have gained your brother."

Success in confrontation is when you are heard. Jesus did not say, "if he agrees with you", "if he shows that he is truly sorry", "if he complies with your demands" or "if the conversation meets your expectations". We hope there is change in the person. That is the work of the Spirit. Our confrontation is a tool that the Spirit may use. It may be possible that we are corrected, or our views change in the process. The Greek word used for "hears" is used 430 times in the New Testament. It never means anything beyond listening.

So that's all? Just listen? We should not be disappointed that success is "just listening". Listening is powerful. Maybe we think it is too low of a standard for receiving critique because we have too low of a standard for what listening is.

Listening to a Matthew 18 confrontation requires humility to hear your sin exposed. It is a gift to the person speaking when we give our attention to what they are communicating and work to understand. If they listen, thank them.

We must have some way of measuring if they truly listened because verse 16 tells us what to do if the person does not listen. We must be careful not to be overly prescriptive here or we start to sound like the child who refuses an apology with the comeback, "you don't sound sorry". Don't demand that they respond in a prescribed way. But we should hold them accountable to doing the hard work of listening. Basic teaching on active listening will tell us that it requires that we don't defend, argue, brush it off, ignore, deflect, or spend the whole time formulating our response. Our measure is not that they change the way we want them to but that they honestly and actively listen.

"...If he hears you, **you have gained your brother**."

The goal is reconciliation. We don't confront to gain leverage but to gain relationship. It is not about winning arguments but winning friends. It is not about their condemnation or your vindication but the relationships reconciliation. If you don't care about a relationship, you have no need to tell them their sin. A reconciled relationship is the motivation behind confronting sin. To confront in a way that loses people is counterproductive.

Reconciliation is a big deal for God. To him, it was worth dying for. And having reconciled us to himself he made us ministers of reconciliation. God's heart is for restored relationship.<sup>ix</sup>

Remember the first word of the verse? It was "moreover". I said that it connected these instructions to the verses that come before it and that we would come back to it. We will do that now. Notice the theme of reconciliation in the verses that surround verse 15.

These are the words of Jesus. The quotation begins all the way back in verse 3. Jesus was responding to the question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (v.1). He took a child on his lap and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in

the kingdom of heaven.” (vv. 3-4). This is significant. Some of us are too timid to confront. Others of us have enough pride and confidence that we are too eager to confront. Confrontation is not about being great. It should be an act of humility. Contesting for greatness loses a brother. Confronting in humility gains a brother. Reconciliation is worth humbling yourself.

He continued to instruct his followers to cut off the hand and take out the eye that causes them to sin(vv.7-9). Sin is separation from God. Reconciliation is worth cutting off a hand for.

He then reveals the heart of God with the story of the shepherd leaving the 99 for the one (v.12). Reconciliation is worth the risk of leaving the 99. God doesn't want to lose one. Gaining a brother is a high priority. Then, when that one was brought back there was rejoicing (v.13). Reconciliation is worth celebrating.

It is worth confronting sin (v.15-16). It is worth including other believers if necessary (v.16). It is worth going through a process of church discipline if necessary (v.17). It is worth forgiving generously (vv.12-35).

Why be humble like a child? Why cut off a hand? Why leave the ninety-nine to search for the one? Why confront? Why hold others accountable? Why forgive? Because reconciled relationships are worth it.

Those 15 soldiers that fled the attack on Roanoke were seen sailing east. They were never seen again.

There were others attempts to establish an English settlement on Roanoke. The most famous is the one known as the Lost Colony. In July of 1587 another group of settlers arrived at Roanoke. For the first time there were civilians, men, women, and children, 117 in all. They dreamed of starting a new life in the New World, but it was terribly difficult. They stepped into a continuing story of wrong action and wrong reaction. Within a week of arrival one of their colonists was found with 16 arrows in his body. In addition to the troubled relations with the native people they were short on supplies and too late in the year to plant. Their captain returned to England to bring back supplies. When he returned, he found the colony deserted. He found the letters CRO carved into a tree and in another place the full word “Croatoan”. It was the name of a native tribe nearby. He hoped that he would find them living in the land of the Croatoan. He didn't. The colonists were never found.

The mystery has excited many theories. It is also a vivid illustration of what happens when we add wrong to wrong, we lose people. The results are predictable. When we do the right thing when we have been wronged we gain people. When we respond to wrong with wrong we lose them.

We've been wronged. We have options. Choose to do right.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/articles/1585voyage.htm#:~:text=In%20addition%20to%20the%20hostilities%20between%20Grenville%20and,exposing%20themselves%20to%20more%20volatile%20weather%20and%20seas.>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/fora/index.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> 183 of the 343 occurrences. See <https://biblehub.com/greek/80.htm>

<sup>iv</sup> Matthew 5:44 and Revelation 2:10

<sup>v</sup> Matthew 5:38-39

<sup>vi</sup> Proverbs 19:11

<sup>vii</sup> <https://biblehub.com/greek/1651.htm>

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viii Crucial Confrontations: Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behavior by Al Switzler, Joseph Grenny, Kerry Patterson, et al.

<sup>x</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17-21