

LESSON 9

How to Handle Conflict Biblically

Matthew 18:15–17; Ephesians 4:1–3

If your brother sins against you, go tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he won't listen, take one or two others with you, so that by the testimony of two or three witnesses every fact may be established. If he doesn't pay attention to them, tell the church. If he doesn't pay attention even to the church, let him be like a Gentile and a tax collector to you, Matthew 18:15–17.

Class Overview: Conflict is an unavoidable part of life, even within the church. But while conflict is inevitable, division is not. Jesus taught His followers in *Matthew 18:15–17* how to address disagreements with humility and truth, beginning privately and aiming always for restoration. Paul reinforces this in *Ephesians 4:1–3*, reminding believers that peace requires effort, patience, and love. The goal of biblical conflict resolution is not to win arguments but to win hearts, to preserve unity and strengthen relationships within the body of Christ. When we handle conflict with grace, we reveal the transforming power of the gospel and protect the unity of the Spirit that binds us together.

Class Objectives:

By the end of this class, you should be able to:

1. Explain the three key steps of Matthew 18:15–17 and how they protect relationships from gossip and division.
2. Describe how humility, gentleness, patience, and love (Ephesians 4:1–3) are essential to keeping unity in times of tension.
3. Identify practical ways to approach disagreements in personal and congregational life with truth and grace.
4. Understand when and how to involve others in conflict resolution, and why wise, godly mediators strengthen the church.
5. Commit to releasing resentment and extending mercy as Christ has forgiven us (Colossians 3:13)

6. Commit to being a peacemaker in every relationship, remembering that restored fellowship glorifies Christ and strengthens His church.

Introduction:

YEARS AGO, I REMEMBER A DISAGREEMENT between members in our congregation over how many times to serve the Lord's Supper on Sunday. What started as a misunderstanding in a business meeting quickly grew into frustration, and within a few weeks, people in the church were avoiding each other entirely. Throughout the summer, the congregation studied the issue. By the fall, things had been worked out and peace restored. I've never forgotten those months because they illustrated one of the most essential truths about relationships in the church: most conflicts don't require big interventions; they just require honest conversations.

Conflict is a part of life, even in the family of God. Wherever there are people, there will be differences: differences in opinion, personality, and perception. But conflict itself isn't the problem; how we handle it is. If ignored or mishandled, minor disagreements can grow into division. But when handled with humility and love, conflict becomes an opportunity for growth, grace, and stronger relationships.

Jesus understood this, which is why He gave clear, practical instructions for how to resolve conflict among believers. In Matthew 18:15–17, He outlines a process rooted in love and truth: a pattern that protects relationships and preserves unity. And Paul teaches this in Ephesians 4:1–3, urging Christians to “walk worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

The goal of conflict resolution isn't to prove we're right; it's to keep relationships right. It's not to win an argument, it's to win a brother or sister back.

So today, as we study how to handle conflict biblically, we'll look at three simple but powerful principles from Scripture: confront privately, seek help when needed, and pursue peace through humility. When we follow

these steps, we turn moments of tension into opportunities for spiritual maturity, and the church becomes a living reflection of Christ's grace and unity.

Confront Privately and Humbly

In Matthew 18:15, Jesus said, *if your brother sins against you, go and rebuke him in private. If he listens to you, you have won your brother.* This verse lays out the first and most essential step in handling conflict biblically: go to the person directly, privately, and with humility. In our culture, it's far easier to talk *about* someone than to talk *to* them. But Jesus reverses that instinct. He commands us to face problems head-on: not to embarrass, accuse, or shame, but to restore.

The goal of confrontation, in Jesus' words, is not to prove who's right, but to *win your brother*. That phrase captures the heart of Christian reconciliation. It's not about scoring a victory; it's about preserving a relationship when we remember that the person who hurt us is not our enemy but our brother or sister in Christ, everything about our tone, attitude, and purpose changes.

1. Go Directly, Not Publicly

Notice that Jesus says to go "in private." He doesn't say to post about it, complain to a friend, or bring it before the church. The first step is a one-on-one conversation. Why? Because love protects. Private correction guards dignity, minimizes embarrassment, and allows for honesty. Most conflicts can be resolved quietly if handled this way. When we involve others prematurely, we risk damaging reputations and deepening division.

Think about how you'd want to be approached if you had unknowingly offended someone. Wouldn't you want the chance to make it right privately before it became public? Jesus' wisdom protects that opportunity.

2. Go Humbly, Not Harshly

Jesus says, *go and rebuke him*, but the word "rebuke" here means to point out gently, not to attack. The spirit of confrontation should be one of

humility, not hostility. Galatians 6:1 says: *If someone is overtaken in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual, restore such a person with a gentle spirit.* The aim is restoration, not humiliation.

Before you go, pray. Ask God to search your heart (Psalm 139:23–24). Make sure your goal is reconciliation, not retaliation. If your motivation is to prove a point or demand an apology, your heart isn't ready. But if you desire to bring peace and healing, God can use that conversation powerfully.

3. Go to Restore, Not to Relieve

It's easy to confront others to "get it off our chest." But Jesus wants more than emotional relief; He wants relational restoration. The end goal is that you "win your brother." When conflict is handled biblically, both sides grow in grace, humility, and mutual respect.

Here's a simple rule: if you're not willing to pray for the person, you're not ready to confront the person. Conflict handled in prayerful humility often ends in peace; conflict handled in pride almost never does.

Practically, this means that when tension arises, you don't delay indefinitely, but you also don't rush in angry. Take the initiative to go privately, with grace in your heart and love in your tone. Ask questions instead of making accusations. Listen more than you speak. Sometimes the very act of approaching someone kindly breaks down the walls of misunderstanding.

Jesus knew that unresolved conflict destroys unity. That's why He gave us this clear path: go privately, go humbly, go to win your brother. If every believer practiced this one verse, the vast majority of church conflicts would disappear overnight.

Seek Help When Needed

After explaining that reconciliation begins privately, Jesus adds, *but if he won't listen, take one or two others with you, so that by the testimony of two or three witnesses every fact may be established. If he doesn't pay attention to them, tell the church. If he doesn't pay attention even to the church, let him be like a Gentile and a tax collector to you.* These verses remind us that while

most conflicts can be resolved one-on-one, some require help. Jesus gives a straightforward, step-by-step process for how to involve others in a way that promotes accountability and unity, not gossip or shame.

1. Bring in Wise, Objective Help

Jesus says to bring “one or two others.” Not everyone you can find, but trusted, spiritually mature believers who can listen objectively and help mediate. Their presence ensures fairness and clarity. Sometimes emotions cloud our perception, and an outside perspective brings balance and peace.

The purpose of involving others is not to “gang up” on the other person but to verify facts and encourage repentance and reconciliation. It’s a loving safeguard that prevents misunderstandings and keeps the process anchored in truth.

In 2021, engineers made a startling discovery on the I–40 bridge that spans the Mississippi River between Memphis, Tennessee, and West Memphis, Arkansas. During a routine inspection, they found a massive crack in one of the bridge’s main support beams. It wasn’t a minor flaw; it was a fracture large enough to threaten the safety of everyone crossing it. Immediately, the bridge was shut down. Traffic stopped. Experts from around the country were called in. The goal wasn’t demolition, it was *repair*. Engineers worked carefully to stabilize the structure, reinforce the damaged section, and restore the bridge to full strength. It took time, precision, and teamwork. Eventually, the bridge reopened; not weaker, but stronger than before.

That’s a perfect picture of what Jesus describes in Matthew 18:16–17. When relationships crack under tension, the goal isn’t to tear them down; it’s to repair them. And sometimes, just like with that bridge, we need help from others who can stabilize the structure. Wise, godly mediators come alongside not to take sides or assign blame, but to strengthen what’s broken.

When a relationship is strained, emotions run high, and perspective can be lost. That’s when mature Christians, elders, ministers, or trusted friends act like those engineers on the bridge. They bring steadiness, wisdom, and patience. They help both sides see clearly, understand

the truth, and rebuild trust. Their goal isn't demolition, it's restoration. Their presence doesn't widen the crack; it helps seal it. And when handled with grace, the relationship that once seemed fragile can emerge stronger, more honest, and more Christlike than before.

2. Protect the Church from Division

If the conflict still cannot be resolved, Jesus says to "tell it to the church." This step isn't about public humiliation; it's about protecting the integrity of the body. When persistent sin or hardened hearts threaten unity, the church must lovingly intervene to call for repentance. The goal is always restoration, never exclusion.

Even in the final phrase, *let him be like a Gentile and a tax collector to you*, Jesus doesn't instruct hatred or hostility. Remember how Jesus Himself treated Gentiles and tax collectors: with truth, compassion, and a desire for redemption. This final step acknowledges broken fellowship but still leaves the door open for grace.

3. Keep the Focus on Restoration, Not Punishment

At every stage, the goal remains the same: to win your brother. If the first conversation doesn't work, try again with help. If the second fails, bring it before the church. But through it all, keep the spirit of humility, gentleness, and love. The process Jesus outlines protects relationships, guards the church's witness, and ensures that truth and grace remain in balance.

Conflict escalates when we skip steps, when we talk to everyone *except* the person involved, or when we go public before we go private. But when we follow Jesus' pattern, even difficult situations can lead to healing.

Practically, this means that when conflict persists, seek help from godly people, elders, ministers, or spiritually mature members, who can guide the conversation toward peace. Invite wisdom, not opinion. Ask others to pray with you, not gossip with you. The presence of others should always make reconciliation more likely, not less. When handled correctly, involving mature believers can turn stubborn tension into humble restoration.

Pursue Peace through Humility

After giving practical instructions for conflict resolution, Paul reminds believers of the spirit that must undergird it all: *therefore I, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*, Ephesians 4:1–3. Conflict resolution is not just a process; it's a posture. Even when we follow all the proper steps, reconciliation will fail if pride or anger rules our hearts. That's why Paul begins with *walk worthy of the calling you have received*. How we handle conflict reflects the gospel we proclaim.

1. Walk Worthy of Your Calling

To “walk worthy” means to live in a manner that reflects Christ. The gospel calls us to peace because Christ Himself is our peace (Ephesians 2:14). The way we respond to disagreement either honors or hinders that calling. When believers handle conflict with grace and truth, the church's unity becomes a living testimony to the power of the gospel. Conflict handled poorly pushes people away; conflict handled biblically draws people closer, not just to each other, but to Christ.

2. Embrace the Posture of Humility and Gentleness

Paul names four attitudes essential for keeping peace: humility, gentleness, patience, and love. These are not natural reactions; they are spiritual disciplines formed by the Spirit.

- **Humility** means letting go of pride and the need to be right.
- **Gentleness** means using words that heal instead of harm.
- **Patience** means giving others time and grace to change.
- **Love** means valuing the relationship more than the argument.

Think about a skilled surgeon operating on a wound. The goal is to remove what's harmful without causing further injury. That requires precision, patience, and care; not haste or harshness. In the same way, when we address conflict with humility and gentleness, we help heal the wound without creating new ones.

3. Make Every Effort to Keep Unity

Paul emphasizes *making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit*. Remember, unity is not something we create; it's something we *preserve*. God has already established unity through the Spirit; our role is to guard it. This means that conflict is not an interruption of ministry; it is part of ministry. The way we respond during moments of tension either protects or disrupts what the Spirit has built.

Unity requires effort, sometimes uncomfortable effort. It means we keep showing up, keep forgiving, keep talking, and keep loving, even when it's hard. The phrase "bond of peace" suggests something that ties us together; the glue of grace that keeps the body from coming apart.

Practically, this means practicing humility in every conflict. Before speaking, pray. Before reacting, listen. Before assuming, ask questions. Before condemning, remember how much patience God has shown you. When humility leads and love guides, peace follows. Paul's vision of unity is not the absence of disagreement but the presence of grace. The church is at its strongest not when everyone always agrees, but when everyone agrees to handle disagreement in a Christlike way.

Practical Application: How to Handle Conflict Biblically

Handling conflict God's way is rarely easy. But it is always worth it. The steps Jesus outlines in Matthew 18 and the attitude Paul describes in Ephesians 4 show us that peace doesn't happen by accident; it occurs through humility, patience, and obedience. Here are some practical ways to apply these principles this week:

1. Pray Before You Speak

Before addressing any conflict, stop and pray. Ask God to search your heart (Psalm 139:23–24) and purify your motives. Ask for wisdom, gentleness, and courage. Prayer softens pride and prepares your heart to listen instead of reacting.

2. Go to the Person, Not Around Them

Follow Jesus' words in Matthew 18:15. Talk privately and directly to the person involved: not to others. Avoid gossip, group chats, or

“venting.” The shortest route to reconciliation is still face-to-face.

3. Listen to Understand, Not to Win

In conflict, it's easy to prepare your defense instead of opening your ears. James 1:19 says, *everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger*. Ask questions like, “Can you help me understand what you meant?” Listening communicates respect and often reveals that misunderstandings, not malice, lie at the heart of the problem.

4. Speak the Truth in Love

Ephesians 4:15 calls us to speak truth lovingly. That means being honest without being harsh. Avoid exaggeration or blame. Use “I” statements instead of “you” accusations (“I felt hurt when . . .” rather than “You always . . .”). Truth heals when it's wrapped in grace.

5. Involve Wise Help When Needed

If resolution doesn't come, bring one or two spiritually mature believers into the conversation (Matthew 18:16). Their goal isn't to take sides, but to bring balance, peace, and accountability. Choose people known for discretion and wisdom, not for drama or opinions.

6. Forgive Freely and Quickly

Conflict can only heal when forgiveness flows. Colossians 3:13 says, *Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you are also to forgive*. Forgiveness doesn't always mean forgetting, but it does mean releasing resentment. When you forgive, you imitate Christ and free both your heart and the relationship.

7. Keep the Relationship the Goal

The aim of conflict resolution is not to win the argument but to win your brother or sister. Remember, unity is the Spirit's work; your job is to protect it (Ephesians 4:3). When love leads and humility follows, peace becomes possible.

Challenge

This week, examine your relationships. Is there someone with whom tension exists—a misunderstanding, hurt, or silent distance? Pray for courage and grace, then take the first step to reach out. Have the conversation. Be the bridge-builder. Choose restoration over resentment and unity over pride.

Conclusion

Conflict is inevitable, but division is optional. Every disagreement we face, whether small or serious, is an opportunity to either reflect the character of Christ or the pride of the world. The way we handle tension reveals the depth of our faith. Jesus never promised that relationships would be free of conflict, but He did show us how to face it with grace, truth, and love.

In Matthew 18, He gave us a simple, God-honoring process: go privately, involve others when needed, and keep the goal of restoration at the center. And in *Ephesians 4*, Paul reminds us that the spirit behind every step must be humility, gentleness, patience, and love. When we follow these commands, peace becomes possible, not because everyone agrees on everything, but because everyone agrees to honor Christ above everything.

The truth is that broken relationships damage more than feelings; they damage the witness of the church. But when believers humble themselves, seek forgiveness, and reconcile, the world sees something powerful: a people transformed by grace. Jesus said, *blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God* (Matthew 5:9).

If there's tension between you and someone else, take the first step this week. Pray. Reach out. Talk honestly. Forgive freely. Choose unity over pride. Every healed relationship strengthens the church and glorifies Christ, the Prince of Peace. When we handle conflict biblically, we don't just resolve problems; we reveal the gospel.

For Discussion

1. Can you think of a time when a conflict in your life or in the church was resolved peacefully and biblically? What attitudes or actions helped bring about that resolution?

2. Why do you think Jesus emphasizes handling conflict privately first? How might following this step prevent gossip, division, or unnecessary hurt?

3. What kind of people should be involved when conflict can't be resolved one-on-one? How does involving wise, godly mediators protect relationships and unity?

4. Paul lists humility, gentleness, patience, and love as essential for unity. Which of these is most difficult for you to practice in moments of conflict, and why?

5. Why is forgiveness so vital to resolving conflict? What happens to relationships, and to your own spiritual health, when you withhold forgiveness?

6. Is there someone you need to reach out to this week to repair a strained relationship? What step will you take first: prayer, conversation, or forgiveness, to begin the process of reconciliation?
