

## **When You Are Wounded**

Matthew 18:15-20

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Two ladies from the same church used the same hair stylist. Like so many of us, these ladies were creatures of habit. Each had a standing appointment down at Barbara's Boutique, one at 10:00 and the other at 10:30 every Saturday morning for twenty years.

Every Saturday, the owner of the beauty shop stood and listened to each of the ladies share news about their families and news about their churches.

For many years, the women were friends, but then something happened. For months, every Saturday, each lady said something negative about the other.

It had gone on so long the owner couldn't say for sure when this behavior started, but she was tired of listening to these women tear each other apart. She knew something must have happened between them because they had vowed to never speak to each other again.

It didn't take long before Gladys, Barbara's 10:00 appointment, began to complain about the latest thing that Willie Mae had done to her, trying to get Barbara to agree with her at every point.

As Barbara put another curler in Gladys' hair she asked, "Have you ever gone to Willie Mae and told her how this has affected you?"

"Well, my goodness, no!" came the swift reply. "I just don't see how that could make things any better. I'd rather kiss a cow than sit down in a room with that woman."

"But don't you each attend the same church?" asked the beautician.

"Well, yes we do," replied Gladys. "But she goes to the early service and I go to the late one. We seem to be able to avoid each other rather well except on Saturdays. Are you sure you this is the only time on Saturday you can fix my hair?"

"Yes, Gladys. This is the only opening I have on Saturdays. Besides, I've been doing your hair at 10:00 for so long I don't think I'd feel right fixing your hair at any other time."

About 10:25, Willie Mae arrived for her appointment. She sat down and looked at a magazine and kept her eyes straight down until Gladys went out the door.

"Well, I thought she'd never leave," she mumbled as she got into the beautician's chair.

Barbara began to broach the subject immediately to Willie Mae but she cut her off. "I don't want to talk about that woman and ruin my day. I'd rather talk about something else."

Barbara didn't go to the same church as these ladies. She was a member of another denomination but she knew that these ladies were dealing with a condition of the heart that transcended age, race, color, or religion.

Still, she wasn't ready to give up on these ladies who used to be friends. So she decided to do an experiment. It was a bit devious but she prayed that the Lord would look at her intentions more than her methods.

Here's what she did:

For four Saturdays in a row, as she fixed each of the ladies' hair, she gave them a compliment of some kind and then mentioned that the other lady was the first to bring it to her attention.

Week after week, she gently placed these little charges of affirmation into their conversations. She wasn't proud of her methods but she wasn't willing to sit back and watch old friends burn up precious time and energy with hatred toward the other, either.

With each week of positive reinforcement, the women began to speak to each other at the beauty shop. Barbara saw progress in their relationship. One Saturday, Gladys even invited Willie Mae to play bridge with some friends over at her house. Wow! The friendship was reemerging.

About two months later, Gladys called and cancelled her hair appointment. Within a day, Willie Mae called and cancelled hers. Barbara knew this could not be a coincidence.

The next Saturday, neither lady showed up or bothered to call so she picked up the phone and called each of them to find out why they hadn't shown up for their regular appointments.

When the two ladies started talking they discovered that neither of them had been saying any of the nice things about the other. They figured it out; Barbara had been making it all up and they had become friends again for nothing. At least, that was their viewpoint.

At least now, they both had something in common. Neither of them liked Barbara. Now they held a grudge against her. They each found a new hairdresser, this time separate ones.

This kind of grudge holding, burning bridges to relationships happens every day. It happens in families, in the workplace, in the community, and in the church.

All of us have had people betray us. We have betrayed others. It happens to us all; whether intentionally or not, we will cause pain to someone else.

This is the question raised by today's text: "What should we do when others in our Christian family sin against us?" What are our options?

We can try to ignore the pain. Good luck with that. That's like having a wounded leg and trying to ignore that your leg hurts.

The Apostle Paul once described the Christian family to a body. We are part of the body of Christ. Just as we cannot isolate any part of our body and act as if it doesn't exist if it is causing pain, it's not possible to ignore another member of the body that's causing great pain, either.

The hurt will not go away by ignoring it, but any good will in the relationship will dissipate quickly.

This only makes things worse; we brood inside. A cold war develops and a chilling breeze blows whenever we are in the same room with the person.

We cease to speak unless it's necessary. We don't say it verbally but our actions speak loudly, "I don't like you. I'd rather not be around you."

Consciously or unconsciously, when we try to ignore the hurt endured from another member of the church, we begin to withdraw from the church's fellowship. We pretend we don't need the church. To avoid the pain, we just avoid church.

The pain causes so much anger that we decide to take revenge.

All of us want justice. However, taking justice in our own hands makes us the judge, a roll that God has not given us over others.

It often feels good initially to retaliate. But soon it becomes obvious that there is a price to pay for an eye-for-an-eye approach to relationships.

It doesn't matter if our revenge is reserved or over-the-top. Revenge is wrong and God has forbidden it. Revenge does nothing to heal relationships. It only adds fodder to the fire and adds hatred in the hearts of others for us.

Another way we deal with hurt from another church member is to get the word out that we've been wounded. We want someone to get the word to the other person that they have wounded us.

We want to have the relationship restored but we want the other person to come and apologize. This sounds reasonable, doesn't it?

If the other person wounded you, it sounds reasonable to most of us that the person who wounded us should be the one to take the initiative to say, "I'm sorry," right? So we wait for that person to come to us.

There's a problem, though. Jesus says that when we are wounded, we should take the first step in restoring the relationship.

Why? Why should we be the ones to make that first uncomfortable step?

Sometimes the person doesn't even know he or she has offended us.

Secondly, reconciliation is possible only when there is forgiveness. Unless we are willing to forgive the person that wounded us, there cannot be restoration in the relationship.

When we go to our brother or our sister in Christ and explain how his or her sin has affected us, we go because we value that relationship enough that we don't want it to be further damaged.

Our going is evidence that we are willing to forgive. Our hope is that in going the other person is willing to acknowledge his or her sin.

“If he listens to you, you have won your brother over,” Jesus said.

If not, the relationship still has problems.

What if that doesn't work?

Jesus said that we should not stop trying. We should try again with the help of two or three witnesses. Why is this step necessary?

Involving trusted men or women with wisdom and a heart for the unity of the church could help keep rumors at bay and help ensure that the facts of the problem are clear.

When there is conflict, often both parties have played some role in the issue and may need to seek forgiveness from the other. Involving others can help us see if this is true in our case.

Few people will bother to go to this much trouble to restore a relationship.

However, how much trouble would you go to keep from losing a finger or a toe, an arm or a leg? Would you make just one trip to the doctor or more?

By involving a few others in helping with the issued, there is hope that it will not affect the entire body.

Conflict between two people often spreads. People take sides. Rumors spread.

Involving the entire body of the church is the last effort of responsibility Jesus mentions that we have. When the sin of one member against another spills over into the entire church, Satan has a great opportunity to do great harm to the witness of the church and to the bond of unity among its members.

This is one of the reasons we must attempt to work out our issues with one another. We are all connected. We cannot isolate our sins against one person and think it does not have an effect on anyone else.

Jesus wants us to solve our problems with one another redemptively, not just for our sake but for the sake of the body of Christ. This process is designed to protect the entire body from the infectious sin of one member.

Finally, if all this has failed, Jesus said to treat the individual as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Matt. 18:17)

While pagans and tax collectors were avoided, I think we must keep in mind how Jesus treated them.

They were always seen as sinners who needed to repent. Jesus kept the doors open for their repentance. Jesus reached out to them even if they didn't reach back. He knew he couldn't force them to have a change of heart, but Jesus kept his heart pure and remained open to a relationship with them. He even called a tax collector as one of his disciples.

I realize that the church should be a safe zone, a place where you should not be wounded, but this is a place where people are recovering from sin. It's not a place where people are free from it.

When it happens here, Jesus doesn't want us to be in denial about it. He doesn't want us to ignore it, hold on to it, or play games with it. He wants us to be adults. He wants us to acknowledge our pain and be willing to forgive the offender even before we confront that person. He wants us to go to that person and so that the offense can be acknowledged and healing can occur. Jesus wants reconciliation because in God's world, it is all about relationships.

Prayer: Father, how you must grieve at the divisiveness that exists at times among Christians. You have given us guidelines to help maintain unity. If the world sees our division, they will want no part of the joy and peace that comes from you.

Speak to those who need healing in their relationships. Give them strength and courage to follow your outline for bringing healing to relationships with their brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen

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