

Proper 18 A  
St. Matthew 18:15-20  
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St. George's Bolton  
Fr. Chris

## Crazy Forgiveness

*“Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”*

No one wants to feel bad or angry. I hate that feeling. Sometimes it is unavoidable, and it is not your fault at all. At other times, you may be a partial player in provoking another to hurt you.

I know what it feels like to be angry. There was a period of my life when I was so angry, it almost consumed me. You could just scratch the surface, and the anger would come out. I remember a friend of mine revealing this to me when I was unaware of how transparent my anger truly was, and she said to me, *“Chris, you need to get some help about this.”* I did. And it took a long time to resolve my hurt and anger.

Sometimes we shake our fist at others who are innocent of our rage, projecting our hurt disproportionately on them over some minor infraction. Sometimes we are angry with God, and shake our fist at God, saying, *“If you really exist, how could you have let this happen?”* Some folks set aside their most important possessions at this point: *their faith in God and their hope.* I have been there too, almost to the point of losing

my faith, but not quite. However, I did feel as though I was living in exile with my anger.

Perhaps the most revealing discovery is that *we are the most angry with ourselves*, even though we tend to blame it on others. When we start to own our own responsibility for our anger, then healing can begin.

All this is to say, no one really can want to feel that angry all the time. We want to feel better. We want to feel happy again. We want to feel hope about life again. And we want to have faith again. We want healing in our relationships with others, starting with ourselves.

And how does the teaching of Jesus speak to this in the Gospel this morning? Jesus lays out a plan for resolving disagreements and hurts. How do you resolve your anger in a Christian way? Jesus knows well that harboring anger in your heart and soul is like embracing a cancer that will eat you alive and destroy you physically, mentally and spiritually. Healing our hurt and anger is an important part of the ministry of God while God was on earth.

Step one: Jesus encourages us to go somewhere private and quiet and to confront the person who has hurt you about the wrong they have done. Some might be reluctant to do this because they know all the wrong was not done by the miscreant they have projected their anger upon. Some may want to stay with their anger and wallow in it. Talking with the real person who you are angry with is vital. They need to hear our hurt and anger, at the same time, we need to hear their response. Plan how you will communicate your anger in a firm, but reasonable way. And if they will not listen to you or will not meet with you, then Jesus offers another way.

Step two: Jesus suggests that you get a couple of friends to support you and to act as witnesses, and that you make a second attempt to speak with the person you feel wronged by. With witnesses, it is much harder for the person who has hurt you to hurt you more. The worst they can do is refuse to listen to you, and disclaim the wrong that they have done, likely because they lack insight into their own behavior. Most reasonable people will welcome the opportunity to talk out their differences in a reasonable, civil way.

This means that it is better not speak with the person you feel hurt by, if all you are going to do is spew unfiltered anger, with cursing and name-calling and searching for an Achilles heal to “get back at the person who has hurt you. The *closer* the so called miscreant is to you, the more likely you know their Achilles heal. Don’t go there. Two wrongs do not make a right. Two sins never resolved any hurts. Neither will it resolve the hurt and anger you feel.

St. Paul summed up the teaching of Jesus well in Ephesians 4:26: *“Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger...”* Being angry is not a sin, it is an emotion. Holding the anger in for long periods of time can become toxic and is not healthy for us. It is the fertile pretext for more sin to happen.

Remember that the rule, *the law of human behavior*, is that you cannot change others no matter what you try to do. They must change themselves. The second part of this law is, *You can only change yourself.*

If you can only change yourself, what then are we to do to resolve our hurt and anger? How do we get rid of it?

You have heard me say this before, but the way to resolving your anger and lifting it from your heart and soul, is to forgive the person who has hurt you. Some will say this is crazy, especially when the other person refuses to take responsibility for their misdeeds or listen to your plaintiff cries. Sometimes the hurt feels so bad that you think you can't possibly forgive what they did. If you think your hurt is so bad, imagine the hurt someone feels when someone kills or hurts their child. Unforgiveable, right?

Well you can stay with that anger, whatever the source, and allow it to redefine and define the rest of your life. And if that's what you want, tune the rest of this sermon out. But if you would like some relief, then we must as Christians go back to the idea of *forgiveness* and *letting go of the hurt* whose weight is crushing us.

How can I begin to forgive? It begins with prayer. Ask for God's help. Get two or three of your friends together and pray for God's help, as Jesus suggests. God will give you the strength to do it. And then, then the prayer is for the one who hurt you. Start praying for them every day. You will find that that act will slowly change you. You see, no one can pray for someone else without starting to love them. It is simply not possible to pray without beginning to love the people in our prayers. Are you crazy, you say? Pray for your enemies and those who have hurt you and maybe, who will continue to hurt you. Prayer forces us to empathize with their point of view and reveals things we never thought possible. Prayer is a very powerful tool. You cannot pray for someone without learning to love them in a Christian way.

It will not happen overnight. It may take months. It may take more than a year. Prayer will help us understand the other who

has hurt us, perhaps why they do what they do, and the healing that we can pray for for them. You may also gain insight into your own behavior and allow yourself to take responsibility for the wrongs and hurts you have done to others, including the person you feel has hurt or wronged you.

I have met and have known very few people who are true sociopaths in my secular work, who hurt others for the enjoyment of seeing others squirm or take pleasure from controlling others. Most people have the capacity to own their own faults and to ask forgiveness of others when they understand the hurt they have caused by their actions.

Prayer is the powerful tool that will eventually enable forgiveness and remove the burden of your hurts and anger. Will you ever forget the hurt? *No*, not if it was truly bad enough. However, the hurt and anger will no longer obsess and overwhelm your life. Will you be best buddies with the person who hurt you? Perhaps, not likely. We may forgive, but we do not forget. But you will get to the point of at least talking civilly.

I know of a Methodist minister, Walter Everett, who forgave his son's killer. He worked his way through the process of Christian forgiveness and he later formed a friendship with this man who killed his son in a drug fueled incident. They went on to give lectures together about the redeeming quality of forgiveness. This is the power of prayer, which Walt would tell you enabled him to forgive this most painful hurt.

*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.* "Prayer is very powerful. So is God's help when you ask for it. AMEN