

Semicontinuous
Exod. 12:1–14
Ps. 149
Complementary
Ezek. 33:7–11
Ps. 119:33–40
Rom. 13:8–14
Matt. 18:15–20

God's Reconciling Community

Goal for the Session

Youth will learn the meaning of Christian reconciliation and develop skills for participating in God's reconciling community.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 18:15–20

WHAT is important to know?

—From "Exegetical Perspective" by Mitchell G. Reddish

Matthew 18:15–20 has parallels with 16:13–20. Both passages use the word "church" (*ekklēsia*)—the only two places the term appears in the Gospels—and both passages speak of binding and loosing. Even though this passage is primarily concerned with matters of church discipline, its focus is on reconciliation, not punishment. The ultimate goal is to "regain the brother" (v. 15). Familial language is used. The final saying in verse 20 is a reminder to the community that the risen Christ is present in and with the church, even when the church must deal with disciplinary issues. This reminder serves as a word of assurance and as a precaution.

WHERE is God in these words?

—From "Theological Perspective" by Charles Hambrick-Stowe

Jesus speaks here not of honest differences of opinion but of a fellow Christian who "sins against you." Such sin would include the offenses summarized in the Ten Commandments, but one might extrapolate it to mean any self-serving behavior that breaks the unity of fellowship in Christ. When church members injure one another, it is not merely an individual personal offense: it is a theological matter, harming the body of Christ. Each step outlined by Jesus is to be undertaken in the hope of healing and restoration. Jesus could mean this: if we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it?

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

—From "Pastoral Perspective" by Jin S. Kim

The ministry of reconciliation must be at the heart of any Christian community's mission. The church has not been given the power to "bind" and to "loose" (v. 18) because it is always right, but because its primary language is one of confession, restoration, and reconciliation when offenses and divisions occur. This requires leadership that confesses in real time before the community, seeking collective accountability and correction as it returns the favor to the church body. There will be conflict, but it is precisely through conflict that we model for the world how to bind and loose one another appropriately.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

—From "Homiletical Perspective" by Dale P. Andrews

Care and responsibility to forgive, to seek out reconciliation with the offender, are sustained in the authority given to the church. Power to bind and loose belongs not simply to the church leader or to the universal church (as demonstrated through Peter in Matt. 16:13–20), but also to the local church (18:18–20). This discipline teaches a theology of care by illumining the manner of care. The authority to interpret how to apply the rules of care, even the law, is given to the church. We seek to care for one another even when injured or offended, which requires discipline in binding and loosing ourselves to repent and to forgive, all sustained in Christ.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 18:15–20

Focus on Your Teaching

Youth are especially oriented to social relationships, and broken relationships can be a significant source of stress. A quarrel with a parent or friend can ruin their week, and unresolved disagreements in church can lead to disillusionment. Youth are likely to take an interest in Jesus' teaching about reconciliation and be encouraged by his promise to be with them in the midst of conflict. Yet some youth may worry that reconciliation depends entirely on their effort, and others might face situations they cannot resolve without help. As you teach, help youth see themselves as part of God's community of reconciliation.

Reconciling God, I have my own broken relationships. Help me also seek reconciliation as I live your good news. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- skein of yarn, scissors
- Bibles
- large sticky notes and pens
- Resource Sheet 1
- hymnbooks or songbooks

For Responding

- option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 2
- option 3: computers or smartphones with Internet connection

For Film Connection

- computer with Internet connection

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, prepare one large sticky note with *Christian Reconciliation* written on it.

Gather the group in a circle. Pass a skein of yarn to the right. Ask learners to say their names, hold onto a section of yarn, and pass the skein on so that it unravels. After the yarn has gone around, invite members to take turns tossing the skein to another person, saying his or her name, making a web. After a few minutes, ask:

✠ How might this web represent community?

Ask the group to brainstorm reasons why relationships get broken. With each reason, cut a line of the web. Note that today's Scripture deals with broken relationships. Pray:

Spirit of God, give us open hearts and minds today as we explore your Word. Amen.

Set the web down so that it retains its shape.

EXPLORING

Distribute Bibles. Ask learners to find Matthew 18:15–20. Explain that today's reading is part of a section where Jesus teaches his followers how to treat each other.

Ask a volunteer to read the heading of Matthew 18:15–20. Explain that modern editors write headings based on what they think a passage is about. Ask a volunteer to read Matthew 18:15–20 aloud. Then ask learners to work in pairs to compose new headings. Give each pair a large sticky note on which to write their new heading. Let pairs post their headings on the wall. Add the sticky note that says *Christian Reconciliation*.

Remind the group that if someone has hurt you and you fear that he or she will harm you if you go to them alone, it is important to take someone with you. Reconciliation is something that happens in a community.

Indicating the last sticky note, ask:

- ✿ What does “reconciliation” mean?

Explain that “to reconcile” means to restore a positive or friendly relationship when it has been broken. Reconciliation is the process of healing broken relationships.

Invite a volunteer to find and read 2 Corinthians 5:18–19 aloud. Ask:

- ✿ According to 2 Corinthians, who does reconciliation start with? (*God, Jesus*)
- ✿ What do you think it means that God has given us the ministry of reconciliation?

To help learners consider why Christians seek reconciliation, ask learners to sit around the web and close their eyes. Invite them to imagine living in the first century. They are part of the new movement of Jesus followers. Slowly read aloud the script provided on Resource Sheet 1 (Imagining Reconciliation Exercise). Then ask:

- ✿ What advice do you have for the friends who counsel revenge?
- ✿ What motives do Christians have for seeking reconciliation?

Invite learners to return to Matthew 18. Ask:

- ✿ In today's passage, what steps toward reconciliation does Jesus recommend? (See vv. 15–17.)
- ✿ How could this sequence of steps be helpful in a conflict?
- ✿ In what kind of situation might this exact sequence of steps *not* be helpful?
- ✿ How might Jesus' promise to be with his followers (verse 20) give encouragement to those seeking reconciliation?

Invite learners to find the ends of a cut strand and tie them back together. Explain that reconciliation is like tying broken strands back together. It takes a community working together. Then ask:

- ✿ What skills for reconciliation can we practice together today?

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of the following learning activities:

- 1. Nonviolent Communication** To help learners develop communications skills, introduce them to nonviolent communication by reading Resource Sheet 2 (Nonviolent Communication) together. Then invite learners to suggest hypothetical scenarios of interpersonal conflict. Together, address the scenarios by composing statements that follow the nonviolent communication route.
- 2. Listening Groups** To help learners practice the skill of listening, form groups of three. Ask everyone to think of a problem to talk about. Set a two-minute timer and ask the first person in each group to describe their problem. Their partners should listen without interrupting. Next, give those who listened one minute in which to ask clarifying questions of the speaker, but without making statements. Do this again twice

**EASY
PREP**

so that each person gets to speak. Invite all members to thank each other for sharing and listening. Debrief the experience. Ask:

✧ What did it feel like to be listened to? What was it like to listen? What would happen if we listened like this more often?

- 3. Reconciliation Research** To help learners discover steps others have taken in seeking reconciliation, ask learners to work in groups to research the peace, truth, and reconciliation movement. Using computers or smartphones with Internet access, invite groups to look up either “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” or “Peace and Reconciliation Commission.” Let groups choose a commission, learn about the steps it took, and present their findings. Ask:

✧ What was required of those who were hurt? What was required of those who did wrong? What lessons can we learn from them?

CLOSING

Gather around the web you made in Gathering. Remind the group that conflict is inevitable in life and in the church, but that God does not leave us alone in it. Read Matthew 18:19–20 again and say that Jesus has promised to be with us when we come together—even when we are dealing with conflict.

Using hymnbooks or songbooks, sing a hymn or song about Christian unity, fellowship, or reconciliation. Suggestions: *O for a World*, words by John Oxenham; *Blest Be the Tie that Binds*, words by John Fawcett; or *They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love*, words by Peter R. Sholtes.

Join hands and pray this prayer or one of your own:

God of grace, you have reconciled us to yourself in Jesus Christ. Give us the courage, energy, patience, and love to seek reconciliation with each other. Amen.

■ ENHANCEMENT

FILM CONNECTION

To introduce learners to people doing dramatic work of reconciliation today, show a portion of the award-winning documentary *The Interrupters*, a film by Steve James and Alex Kotlowitz. The film follows three former gang members and prison inmates who work with the organization CeaseFire to defuse violent situations on the streets of South Chicago. Both the original and the edited broadcast version of the film can be viewed at pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/interrupters/. To discuss, ask:

✧ How do you respond to the idea that violence is a social disease?

✧ What makes these three “interrupters” so effective at reconciliation?

Imagining Reconciliation Exercise

Teacher's Script

It is the first century. You are part of a new religious group that rejoices that Jesus has mended your relationship with God. Some people call you Christians. Your group is small; you are a tiny minority among other religions and groups. But nothing your little group does escapes notice.

When Christians do good things, like taking care of orphans and widows, the people of your city approve. Sometimes people come to you and become Christians. But your group also has many critics and enemies. They miss no chance to criticize you and your God. They are especially pleased whenever an argument breaks out among the Christians.

One day, you discover something upsetting. A fellow Christian has stolen from you. Talking to two close friends, you say, "Someone has stolen something from me. How can I be reconciled to him?"

One friend says, "What? You should just tell everyone what he did. That will teach him."

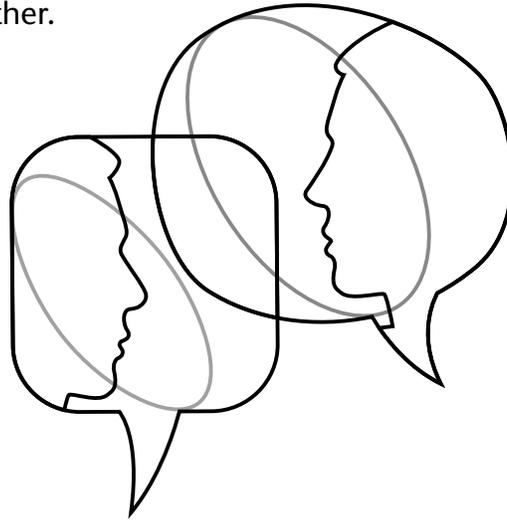
The other says, "Why not get revenge? You should steal something from him."

What do you say in response to these friends?



Nonviolent Communication

Nonviolent Communication (NVC), developed by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, is a way of communicating about conflicted issues. NVC looks simple, but it takes practice! Read about it below and practice the process together.



Observation: I say the concrete actions that I am observing that are affecting my well-being.

Example: “(Name), I notice that you canceled plans with me the last three times we were going to meet up because you had double booked your schedule.”

Not: “You’re so unreliable! You never follow through!”

Feeling: I say how I feel in relation to what I am observing.

Example: “I am feeling sad and discouraged about our friendship.”

Not: “I feel ignored, abandoned, and taken for granted.” (These are interpretations of the other’s actions, not emotions. They lead to defensiveness.)

Needs: I say the needs, values, or desires that are creating or leading to my feelings.

Example: “I really value my time with you, and I have a need to know that others value their time with me.”

Not: “I have a need for you to stop being so insensitive.”

Request: I say the concrete actions that I am requesting in order to enrich my life.

Example: “Would you be willing next time we make plans to check your schedule carefully so you can be sure to be there?”

Not: “Can you try to be more responsible with your life?”

For more information, see Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2003), 6–7.