

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

Restorative Discipline

Goal for the Session *Adults will envision ways to practice reconciliation in the faith community through exploring Jesus' teachings on restorative discipline.*

■ 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

Most adults will be able to recall specific experiences of conflict in the church. Some may have seen reconciliation emerge out of such situations. Some may have witnessed the havoc wrought when the inability to reconcile leads to schism or ostracism. Today's text beckons the church to consider faithful ways to respond when estrangement looms. The text offers insights into what might lead to restoration in such times. Be aware that this session might strike a nerve in those for whom a serious congregational or denominational conflict is recent or ongoing.

*Be with me, O God, in my preparation and in my leading of this session.
And may I be open to your presence in both. Amen.*

YOU WILL NEED

- newsprint
- marker
- broken object
- Bibles
- Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 13, 2020

For Responding

- option 1: Resource Sheet 2
- option 2: newsprint, markers, church guidelines for conflict resolution or ethical misconduct (optional)
- option 3: Resource Sheet 2

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, write the quote used in the Exploring sidebar on a sheet of newsprint, and set it aside.

Welcome participants as they arrive. Introduce any newcomers. If this is the group's first time together after summer break, get reacquainted. For example, ask everyone to describe their summer in five words or less.

Hold up the broken object (or its pieces) and ask for ideas about how to restore it. Ask: What would you have to be careful to do; what would you have to be careful not to do? For example: If the broken object were wood, you wouldn't want to use a welding torch!

Relate that today's session is part of a series of teachings by Jesus about reconciliation in the church when relationships get broken.

Lead the group in this prayer or one of your choosing:

Gather us, O God, as your people. Gather us in the knowledge that you dwell in our midst. Gather us that we may be led by your Spirit. Amen.

EXPLORING

Have a volunteer read Matthew 18:15–20 aloud to the group while others follow along in their Bibles. Invite general reactions to the text.

Read the "What?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 18:15–20), beginning at the sentence "Even though this passage is primarily concerned . . ." Discuss what participants understand "reconciliation" to mean in the context of this passage.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Digging Deeper). Direct participants to silently read and reflect on Part 1, “Setting the Context for Matthew 18:15–20.”

Ask participants to listen to Matthew 18:15–20 as you read it aloud—only now, have them listen to the passage through the insights raised by the “Setting the Context” paragraph. After the reading, ask participants to offer any fresh impressions or questions about this passage.

Form three groups. Direct the first group to take the role of the one who has been sinned against in this passage; the second group to take the role of the one who has offended; and the third group to take the role of the “witnesses” and the church. In each group, discuss what Jesus’ teachings in these verses encourage you to do, and to what purpose.

Gather the three groups together, and have each group report on their discussion. Reflect on similarities and differences between the actions and purposes that the groups identified.

Read aloud verse 17b (“ . . . and if the offender refuses to listen . . .”). Ask participants what they understand to be the implications for community and relationship of “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Post the newsprint with the sidebar quote written on it for participants to read. Afterward, discuss how that perspective might influence what we take Jesus to be saying here.

“Churches usually hear this as license to excommunicate, exile, or otherwise shun the individual. However, since Jesus often interacted with Gentiles, tax collectors, prostitutes, and other unsavory outsiders, we should think more deeply about his meaning.”¹

Ask participants to consider the final sentence of the “What?” excerpt, which declares verse 20 to serve as both “a word of assurance and as a precaution.” Discuss the following issues:

- ✠ How might the promise of Christ’s presence bring assurance in this text: to the one who has been offended; to the one who has offended; to the whole community?
- ✠ How might the promise of Christ’s presence serve as a precaution in this text: to the one who has been offended; to the one who has offended; to the whole community?

In this conversation, link such assurances and precautions to Jesus’ overarching concern, in this passage and its wider context, for disciplines aimed at reconciliation.

Responding

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Cutting Loose—or Hanging On?** Reconciliation is a discipline precisely because what it calls on us to do may not be easy to do. Read Part 2, “Cutting Loose—Or Hanging On?” on Resource Sheet 2. Invite participants to recall times when they or their churches faced decisions about “cutting loose or hanging on”—whether in regard to a particular individual or a group within the church. Discuss what reconciliation required in those circumstances—or where it foundered. Challenge participants to do at least one thing this week that maintains ties with someone it might be easier to just cut loose, inside or outside the church.

EASY
PREP

1. Excerpted from *Charles Hambrick-Stowe, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 48.

Your church may have a set of guidelines for conflict resolution or ethical misconduct. If so, it might be helpful to have these on hand, and to compare the process related there with option 2 in Responding.

- 2. Taking Steps toward Reconciliation** The steps Jesus uses in addressing estrangement in hope of restoration provide a helpful outline for reviewing how we seek to do the same. Have the participants create a “checklist” for dealing with conflict and estrangement in your congregation based on Jesus’ teachings here. Write these on newsprint. Discuss at each point the value and the risk of each stage. Encourage participants to use this list in situations it might apply to in their lives outside of church.
- 3. A Litany of Confession and Restoration** Prayer and worship form the nexus of faithful action, including reconciliation. Invite participants to offer prayers that confess places of estrangement in the church and needs for reconciliation. After each prayer, lead the group in a litany response found in Part 2 of Resource Sheet 2: “If we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it?” Urge participants to make this response a regular part of their prayer life.

Closing

Gather in a circle around the broken object. Invite participants to remember the things they thought would be helpful or harmful for restoring this object. Invite them now to look at the broken object as a symbol of the church—and the discipline required for restoration. Ask them to name what this session has identified as leading toward reconciliation in the community of faith.

If you did not use option 3 in Responding, lead the group in the litany it describes. If you used option 3 in Responding, close with this prayer or one of your choosing:

Holy God, your grace restores us—and in doing so, calls us to be reconciled with one another. Be among us, as the One whose very presence reminds us of that calling and bears to us the grace to be reconciled. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 13, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

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Digging Deeper



Part 1 Setting the Context for Matthew 18:15–20

This passage comes in the middle of a larger section in which Matthew has Jesus dealing with matters related to ecclesiology and life in the church. Prominent leaders (who might be considered “greatest in the kingdom of heaven”) are to have the humble status of a child and serve among the lowly (Matthew 18:1–5); disciples must eschew behavior that “put[s] a stumbling block” in the path of fellow believers (18:6–7), becoming radically scrupulous about personal morality (18:8–9); believers must care diligently for one another so that not one will be lost (18:10–14); and fellowship in Christ requires constant and boundless forbearance, forgiving one another “seventy times seven” if necessary (18:21–35). In this context Jesus addresses the question of what to do when “a brother” (i.e., “another member of the church”) “sins against you” (v. 15).

—Excerpted from Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 44.

Part 2 Cutting Loose—Or Hanging On

The rest of the world writes people off when things reach a certain point. Jesus’ saying, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (v. 18), is susceptible to multiple interpretations. In light of his teaching on life in the church as the locus of God’s mission in the world, and this verse’s echo of the Lord’s Prayer (God’s will being done “on earth as it is in heaven”), Jesus could mean this: If we in the church do not forgive and heal, who on earth is going to do it? . . . Jesus commands us never to give up on them, never to stop reaching out in love to them, always to yearn for grace to restore what has been broken.

—Excerpted from Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 48.