

**Conversations on
Matthew 18:15–20**

Discuss this passage in light of the commentary below.

Idea! Show a portion of the award-winning documentary *The Interrupters* at pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/interrupters/. Discuss what makes these three “interrupters” so effective at reconciliation.

WHAT is important to know?

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. (*Mitchell G. Reddish*)

- ✠ What do the terms “bind” and “loose” refer to in this passage? How do those terms relate to reconciliation?
- ✠ What, if any, is the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation?
- ✠ How is the reference to “church” important?

WHERE is God in these words?

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? (*Charles Hambrick-Stowe*)

- ✠ What is the difference between a difference of opinion and the kind of disagreement described in the text?
- ✠ How might the presence of Christ affect our approach to conflict or disagreement?
- ✠ What is the difference between “forgive and forget” and “forgive and heal”?

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

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. (*Jin S. Kim*)

- ✠ How can the church model appropriate “binding” and “loosing” for the world?
- ✠ How is the ministry of reconciliation present in your congregation?

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

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. (*Dale P. Andrews*)

- ✠ What are some things that you “bind” and “loose” in your own life? Are there changes needed in what you “bind” and “loose”?
- ✠ What might your church do differently if the conflict were addressed using the method described by Jesus?
- ✠ What are some things a church should be careful about when using this method to address conflict or disagreement?

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.