

**Reconciliation: Justice with Love (Matthew 18:15–20) September 6, 2026****Premkumar Immanuel Clement**

There are some conflicts we never forget—not because they were resolved, but because they were never truly reconciled.

For thirty-five years, I taught at a Christian college in India founded by American Congregational missionaries about 145 years ago. Although the college remained Christian after India's independence, it functioned without the direct control of an episcopal authority. The executive responsibilities belonged to the president, while a governing council, headed nominally by a bishop, exercised oversight.

During the twentieth year of my service, a serious administrative conflict developed between the president and the governing council. What began as a dispute over authority gradually divided the entire campus into two opposing groups. Faculty and staff were drawn into the conflict. Educational services were disrupted for nearly two years. Salaries were not paid. Families suffered. The academic community was wounded.

What troubled me most was that the conflict increasingly became a struggle over authority, punishment, exclusion, and legal victory, rather than an effort toward restoration and reconciliation. Court cases multiplied. Each side sought to establish its rights and defeat the other side. The question became, "Who is right?" and "Who has the authority?" rather than, "How can this community be healed?"

Looking back through the lens of Matthew 18, I now see what was missing.

There was very little room for quiet conversation, for listening, for bringing trusted people into the process, for communal discernment, for repentance, forgiveness, or restoration. Justice became primarily institutional and judicial rather than relational and restorative.

And that experience has made today's Gospel particularly important to me.

Jesus says:

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone."

Notice where Jesus begins: Not with punishment. Not with exclusion. Not with the courts. Not with public accusation. He begins with relationship.

### **1. Christian justice begins with honoring the person**

Jesus says, "Go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." There is something profoundly dignifying about this command. If someone has hurt us, the easiest thing is often to talk about that person to everyone except the person involved. We gather supporters. We build our case. We seek confirmation that we are right. Jesus says: Go to the person. Why? Because the offender is not merely an offender. The person who hurt us is still a child of God. And the person we are confronting is still someone with whom we are called to live in the body of Christ. Christian reconciliation does not mean ignoring the truth. The goal is not simply to establish who is right. The goal is to win your brother or sister back. That is why Christian justice must always be justice with love.

### **2. Matthew 18 challenges the individualism of our culture**

This is especially important in a culture that highly values the autonomous individual.

Modern Western culture has been deeply shaped by Enlightenment ideas about the rights, freedom, autonomy, and self-determination of individuals. Thinkers such as John Locke helped articulate a political vision in which individuals possess rights and enter into relationships and social arrangements voluntarily. Those ideas have contributed enormously

to our understanding of human dignity and freedom. But there is a danger when that understanding becomes the dominant way we imagine the church. If the church becomes simply a voluntary association of autonomous individuals, then we can begin to think:

"I attend church because I choose to." "My faith is my private matter." "I am responsible for myself, and you are responsible for yourself." "If I don't like what is happening, I can simply leave." We gather on Sunday, worship together for an hour, and then return to our separate lives.

But that is not Paul's understanding of the church. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12 that the church is a **body**. And when one member suffers, all suffer together. When one member is honored, all rejoice together. Because we are the body of Christ, the wound of one eventually becomes the wound of all. Reconciliation, therefore, is not merely a private matter. It is a ministry of the whole body.

### **3. Matthew 18 gives us a pastoral process, not a weapon of control**

Jesus gives us a graduated process. First: speak privately. Second: if that does not work, take one or two others with you. Third: if necessary, bring the matter before the church. Unfortunately, this passage can become dangerous when it is interpreted through individualism or legalism. A person who feels victimized can use Matthew 18 as a weapon: "I am right; you are wrong; now I will gather people against you." Church leaders can also misuse this passage to control people, silence criticism, or protect institutional power. That is not the spirit of Jesus. The purpose of the process is not control. It is restoration.

The movement is from the least intrusive intervention toward greater communal involvement, and only when necessary. That is why Christian leaders need more than administrative skill. They need spiritual discernment. Church discipline, therefore, should never be understood

simply as punishment. Church discipline is discipleship in the presence of conflict. Its purpose is to restore people to right relationship with God, with one another, and with the community.

#### **4. Christian reconciliation holds truth and dignity together**

There is a tension here that we must not escape. The modern legal world rightly asks:

What is true? What happened? Who is responsible? What are the facts? Those questions matter. But the Gospel asks another question: What will preserve the dignity of this person and the health of this community while we tell the truth? Christianity does not choose between truth and love. Paul says we are to "speak the truth in love." Truth without love can become cruelty. Love without truth can become sentimental avoidance. Justice without love can become vengeance. And love without justice can become enabling. **Reconciliation: Justice with Love** means holding these realities together.

#### **5. Reconciliation is possible because Christ is present**

And now we come to the most important part of this passage. Jesus says: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." We often quote this verse when only two or three people attend a meeting or worship service. But in its context, Jesus is speaking about conflict, discernment, accountability, and reconciliation. That changes everything. Jesus is saying: You are not alone when you enter difficult conversations. I am there.

The presence of Christ changes the purpose of church discipline. We do not gather merely to decide who wins. We gather to discern what Christ is doing among us. And Jesus gives the church the authority to "bind" and "loose"—not because the church is always right, but because the church is entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. Therefore, Christian leadership must itself be accountable. A pastor cannot demand accountability from the

congregation while refusing accountability personally. A bishop cannot speak about obedience while refusing correction. The church must model the reconciliation it preaches.

My experience in that college taught me something I wish I had understood more deeply at the beginning: A conflict can be won and the community can still lose. A legal victory does not necessarily produce reconciliation. An administrative victory does not necessarily heal relationships. Punishment does not necessarily produce repentance. And establishing authority does not necessarily restore trust. The church is called to something greater.

We are called to become a community where justice is never separated from love, where truth is never separated from grace, where authority is never separated from accountability, and where discipline is always oriented toward restoration. The ministry of reconciliation is not an optional activity of the church. It is at the heart of who the church is. Amen.