

Reformation: Healing Broken Relationships



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Tim. 4:11, Philem. 1–25, 2 Cor. 10:12–15, Rom. 5:8–11, Matt. 18:15–17.*

Memory Text: “For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (*Romans 5:10, NKJV*).

Even after Pentecost, the relationship between believers was at times strained. The New Testament records repeated examples of the way that church leaders and individual members dealt with such challenges. These principles are extremely valuable for the church today. They reveal the positive results that can come when we use biblical principles to deal with conflicts.

In this week's lesson we will focus on restored relationships. Great spiritual revivals in the past fostered healed relationships. Movements of the Holy Spirit involve bringing people closer to God and to one another. They include breaking down the barriers in our relationship with God and breaking down barriers in our relationships with one another. In short, the greatest demonstration of the power of the gospel is not necessarily what the church says but how the church lives.

“ ‘By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’ ” (*John 13:35, NKJV*). Without this love, all our talk about revival and reformation will come to naught.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 21.*

From Fracture to Friendship

Paul and Barnabas worked together in witnessing for Jesus. But they had some strife between them (*Acts 15:36–39*). Paul could not trust one as fearful as John Mark. The potential dangers of preaching the gospel had caused John Mark at one point to desert Paul and Barnabas and return home.

“This desertion caused Paul to judge Mark unfavorably, and even severely, for a time. Barnabas, on the other hand, was inclined to excuse him because of his inexperience. He felt anxious that Mark should not abandon the ministry, for he saw in him qualifications that would fit him to be a useful worker for Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 170.

Although God used all these men, the issues between them needed resolution. The apostle, who preached grace, needed to extend grace to a young preacher who had disappointed him. The apostle of forgiveness needed to forgive. John Mark grew in the affirming mentorship of Barnabas and, eventually, Paul’s heart was apparently touched by the changes.

How do Paul’s letters from prison to Timothy and the church at Colossae reveal his renewed relationship with John Mark and a new confidence in this young preacher? *Col. 4:10, 11; 2 Tim. 4:11.*

Although details of Paul’s reconciliation with John Mark may be sketchy, the biblical record is clear. John Mark became one of the apostle’s trusted companions. Paul highly recommended John Mark as a “fellow worker” to the church at Colossae. At the end of Paul’s life, he strongly encouraged Timothy to bring John Mark with him to Rome because he was “useful to me for ministry” (*NKJV*). Paul’s ministry was enriched by the young preacher, whom he had obviously forgiven. The barrier between them was broken, and they were able to work together in the cause of the gospel.

How can we learn to forgive those who have hurt or disappointed us? At the same time, why does forgiveness not always include a complete restoration of a previous relationship? Why does it not always need to?

From Slave to Son

While he was imprisoned in Rome, Paul met a runaway slave named Onesimus who had fled from Colossae to Rome. Paul personally knew Onesimus' master. The Epistle of Philemon is Paul's personal appeal to his friend regarding a restored relationship with the runaway slave.

Relationships mattered to Paul. The apostle knew that fractured relationships are detrimental to spiritual growth. Philemon was a church leader in Colossae. If he harbored bitterness toward Onesimus, it would color his Christian witness.

Read Philemon 1–25. What important principles about restored relationships can we find here? Remember, the key word is principles.

At first glance it is somewhat surprising that Paul did not speak more forcefully against the evils of slavery. But Paul's strategy was far more effective. The gospel, ideally, breaks down all class distinctions (*Gal. 3:28*). The apostle sent Onesimus back to Philemon, not as a slave but as his son in Jesus and Philemon's "beloved brother" in the Lord (*Philem. 16*).

Paul knew that runaway slaves had little future. They could be apprehended at anytime. They were doomed to a life of destitution and poverty. But now, as Philemon's brother in Christ and willing worker, Onesimus could have a wonderful future. His food, lodging, and job could be made secure under Philemon. The restoration of a broken relationship could make a dramatic difference in his life. He became a "faithful and beloved brother" and colaborer in the gospel with Paul (*Col. 4:9*).

Drawing from the principles of the gospel as seen here, what can you take away that can help you to deal with whatever stresses and strains, even fractures, you have in relationships with others?

From Comparison to Complement

As we saw in an earlier lesson, the church at Corinth had deep problems. What principles does Paul outline in 1 Corinthians 3:5–11, 12:1–11, and 2 Corinthians 10:12–15 for healing and restoration, all of which are so vital to revival and reformation?

In these passages, the apostle outlines critical principles of church unity. He points out that Jesus uses different workers to accomplish different ministries in His church, even though each one is laboring together for the building up of God's kingdom (*1 Cor. 3:9*).

God calls us to cooperation, not competition. Each believer is gifted by God to cooperate in ministering to the body of Christ and serving the community (*1 Cor. 12:11*). There are no greater or lesser gifts. All are necessary in Christ's church (*1 Cor. 12:18–23*). Our God-given gifts are not for selfish display. They are given by the Holy Spirit for service.

All comparisons with others are unwise, because they will make us feel either discouraged or arrogant. If we think that others are far "superior" to us, we will feel despondent when we compare ourselves to them. If we think our labors for Christ are more effective than the work of others, we will feel proud. Both of these attitudes cripple our effectiveness for Christ. As we labor within the sphere of influence that Christ has given us, we will find joy and contentment in our witness for Christ. Our labors will complement the efforts of other members, and the church of Christ will make giant strides for the kingdom.

Can you think of someone whose gifts in ministry have made you jealous? (Not too hard, is it?) At the same time, how often have you felt proud of your gifts in contrast to those of others? The point is, Paul's concerns are an ever-present reality in fallen beings. Regardless of the side on which we fall, how can we learn the unselfish attitudes that are necessary in order to avoid the pitfalls here?

From Friction to Forgiveness

What is forgiveness? Does forgiveness justify the behavior of someone who has horribly wronged us? Is my forgiveness dependent on the offender's repentance? What if the one with whom I am upset does not deserve my forgiveness?

How do the following passages help us to understand the biblical nature of forgiveness? *Rom. 5:8–11; Luke 23:31–34; 2 Cor. 5:20, 21; Eph. 4:26–30.*

Christ took the initiative in reconciling us to Himself. It is the “goodness of God [that] leads you to repentance” (*Rom. 2:4, NKJV*). In Christ, we were reconciled to God while we were yet sinners. Our repentance and confession do not create reconciliation. Christ's death on the cross did; our part is to accept what was done for us.

It is true that we cannot receive the blessings of forgiveness until we confess our sins. This does not mean that our confession creates forgiveness in God's heart. Forgiveness was in His heart all the time. Confession, instead, enables us to receive it (*1 John 1:9*). Confession is vitally important, not because it changes God's attitude toward us but because it changes our attitude toward Him. When we yield to the Holy Spirit's convicting power to repent and confess our sin, we are changed.

Forgiveness is also so crucial for our own spiritual well-being. A failure to forgive someone who has wronged us, even if he or she does not deserve forgiveness, can hurt us more than it hurts him or her. If an individual has wronged you and the pain festers inside because you fail to forgive, you are allowing that person to hurt you even more.

Forgiveness is releasing another from our condemnation because Christ has released us from His condemnation. It does not justify another's behavior toward us. We can be reconciled to someone who has wronged us because Christ reconciled us to Himself when we wronged Him. We can forgive because we are forgiven. We can love because we are loved. Forgiveness is a choice. We can choose to forgive in spite of the other person's actions or attitudes. This is the true spirit of Jesus.

How can focusing on the forgiveness we have in Christ help us to learn to forgive others?

From Rancor to Restoration

Read Matthew 18:15–17. What three steps does Jesus give us to help us to resolve conflicts when we are wronged by another church member? How are we to apply these words in our contemporary situations?

Jesus' desire in giving the counsel of Matthew 18 is to keep conflict in as small a group as possible. His intent is that the two people involved solve the problem themselves. This is why Jesus declares, " 'If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone' " (*Matt. 18:15, NKJV*). As the number of people involved in a conflict between two individuals increases, the more contention is created. People take sides, and the battle lines are drawn. But when Christians attempt to settle their differences privately, and in the spirit of Christian love and mutual understanding, a climate of reconciliation is created. The atmosphere is right for the Holy Spirit to work with them as they strive to resolve their differences.

There are times when personal appeals for conflict resolution are ineffective. In these instances, Jesus invites us to take one or two others with us. This second step in the reconciliation process must always follow the first step. The purpose is to bring people together, not drive them farther apart. The one or two who join the offended party are not coming to prove his or her point or to join in blaming the other individual. They come in Christian love and compassion as counselors and prayer partners in order to participate in the process of bringing two estranged people together.

There are occasions when all attempts to solve the problem do not work. In this case, Jesus instructs us to bring the issue before the church. He is certainly not talking about interrupting the Sabbath morning worship service with an issue of personal conflict. The appropriate place to bring the issue, if the first two steps have not helped to reconcile the two parties, is the church board. Again, Christ's purpose is reconciliation. It is not to blame one party and exonerate the other.

"Do not suffer resentment to ripen into malice. Do not allow the wound to fester and break out in poisoned words, which taint the minds of those who hear. Do not allow bitter thoughts to continue to fill your mind and his. Go to your brother, and in humility and sincerity talk with him about the matter."—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 499.

Further Study: “When the laborers have an abiding Christ in their own souls, when all selfishness is dead, when there is no rivalry, no strife for the supremacy, when oneness exists, when they sanctify themselves, so that love for one another is seen and felt, then the showers of the grace of the Holy Spirit will just as surely come upon them as that God’s promise will never fail in one jot or tittle.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 175.

“If we stand in the great day of the Lord with Christ as our refuge, our high tower, we must put away all envy, all strife for the supremacy. We must utterly destroy the roots of these unholy things, that they may not again spring up into life. We must place ourselves wholly on the side of the Lord.”—Ellen G. White, *Last Day Events*, p. 190.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Read Colossians 3:12–17 in class. Discuss the Christian qualities that the apostle Paul encourages the church at Colossae to seek. Why are these qualities the basis for all conflict resolution? How do they guide us in carrying out the principles that Jesus gives us in Matthew 18:15–18?
- ② Look again at Colossians 3:12–17 and the teachings found in these verses. Why are these things so utterly essential for the revival and reformation that we so desperately need in the church?
- ③ If we look at our church—that is, the Seventh-day Adventist Church—as a whole, what is the greatest thing holding us back from the kind of revival and reformation that will be needed in order to reach the world? Is it our teachings and doctrines? Of course not. These are the very things that God has given us to proclaim to the world. The problem lies solely in us, in our interpersonal relationships, our petty jealousies, our bickering, our selfishness, our desire for supremacy, and a whole host of other things. Why must you, yes, you, not the person next to you in the pew, not the pastor—but you, yourself—plead for the power of the Holy Spirit to bring the changes that have to occur in you before we will see revival and reformation in the whole church?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Romans 5:8–11*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Examine Jesus' counsel in Matthew 18 as a model for conflict resolution.

Feel: Nurture the Spirit of forgiveness by rediscovering the depth of Christ's forgiveness, compassion, and mercy.

Do: Learn how to forgive those who have wronged him or her with the same attitude of forgiveness with which Jesus forgives the sinner.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: When Friends Differ

A Describe the differing attitudes of Paul and Barnabas toward John Mark. Why do you think Paul had a lack of faith in John Mark?

B Contrast Paul's attitude toward John Mark and his attitude toward Onesimus? Do you think that Paul grew in his understanding of God's grace and forgiveness? Explain.

II. Feel: When Your Heart Hurts

A How would you feel if you were John Mark and someone whom you deeply respected had lost confidence in you?

B How would you feel if you were either Onesimus or Paul? Has anyone ever placed confidence in you when you knew you had sinned? Would you like to share that experience?

C Has anyone who has wronged you ever approached you based on the principles of Matthew 18? How did you feel?

III. Do: When Healing Comes

A How can we follow Christ's example and take the initiative to forgive those who have wronged us as Christ forgave us?

B How does understanding 1 Corinthians 12:1–11 and Romans 8:5–11 provide us with the tools to first understand and then forgive those who may have wronged us?

► **Summary:** Jesus exhibited the spirit of forgiveness when we did not deserve it so that we can forgive others when they do not deserve it. As he grew in grace, the apostle Paul modeled and taught this same attitude of forgiveness.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Romans 5:8–11*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: It is surprising how little things fracture friendships at times. A hasty word, a rude response, or an impatient outburst can destroy a relationship. In this week’s lesson, we will discover biblical principles that can heal broken relationships. Jesus’ example of forgiveness challenges us to forgive those who have wronged us.

Just for Teachers: The principles of forgiveness outlined in the Bible are just as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago. As we study the experiences of the apostle Paul with John Mark, Onesimus and Philemon, and the Corinthian church, we will discover practical ways of solving the interpersonal-relationship conflicts that arise in our own lives. Paul recognized that, of all people, he needed forgiveness so he could extend forgiveness to others.

One thing that most people understand is that those who are able to forgive wrongs done to them are able to move on with their lives and heal from the agony of the past. Those who cannot forgive are locked in the past and destined to be doomed by it. The ability to forgive makes all the difference. Thus, forgiveness is just as crucial for the one forgiving as it is for the one being forgiven.

Discuss With the Class: What does the Lord’s Prayer mean when Jesus prays, “‘And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us’” (*Luke 11:4, NKJV*)?

► **STEP 2**—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. Jesus: The Model of Forgiveness (*Review Romans 5:8–11 with your class.*)

Forgiveness is both an attitude of the heart and an act of reconciliation with God. God modeled this forgiveness in the plan of salvation through Jesus

Christ. Jesus does not forgive us because we are worthy. Accepting the forgiveness He freely offers makes us worthy. We are not forgiven because we are righteous. When He forgives us, we become righteous. In one of the most amazing biblical passages, Paul explains the magnitude of God's love in these words, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (*Rom. 5:8, NKJV*). J. B. Phillips is correct when he translates the passage this way, "Yet the proof of God's amazing love is this: that it was while we were sinners that Christ died for us." The word *demonstrates* in the New King James Version might also be translated as "commends," "establishes," "recommends," or "proves." Christ's death on the cross does all of the above. It commends God's love to us before the entire universe. It establishes His love without a shadow of a doubt. It recommends His love to the entire human race, and it both answers the charges of Satan that God is unjust and proves His love forever.

He did all this for us when we were His "enemies" (*vs. 10, NKJV*). In our fallen, sinful natures we were hostile toward God; He took the initiative and reconciled us to Himself through the death of His Son. This initiative makes all the difference in the world. Because He reached out to us when we were not reaching out to Him, we can reach out to others when they are not reaching out to us. Because He forgave us when we did not deserve it, we can forgive others when they do not deserve it.

Consider This: To forgive is to release another from our condemnation because Christ released us from His condemnation. How can we apply this concept of forgiveness to those who have wronged us? What does it mean practically? What doesn't it mean?

II. The Church: Ambassadors of Forgiveness (*Review Matthew 18:15–17 with your class.*)

In His counsel regarding restored relationships in Matthew 18:15–17, Jesus gives specific instructions to keep the conflict between two people in as small a circle as possible. The reason an individual first attempts to solve the problem by approaching his or her brother or sister alone is that people often become much more defensive if they feel their actions are being challenged in the presence of others. The book *The Desire of Ages* gives us this divine insight: "In the spirit of meekness, 'considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted' (Gal. 6:1), go to the erring one, and 'tell him his fault between thee and him alone.' Do not put him to shame by exposing his fault to others, nor bring dishonor upon Christ by making public the sin or error of one who bears His name. Often the truth must be plainly spoken to the erring; he must be led to see his error, that he may reform. But you are not to judge or

to condemn. Make no attempt at self-justification. Let all your effort be for his recovery. In treating the wounds of the soul, there is need of the most delicate touch, the finest sensibility. Only the love that flows from the Suffering One of Calvary can avail here. With pitying tenderness, let brother deal with brother, knowing that if you succeed, you will ‘save a soul from death,’ and ‘hide a multitude of sins.’ James 5:20.”—Ellen G. White, p. 440.

The loving, forgiving Spirit of Jesus makes all the difference. Then, if the person does not respond, invite one or two other godly people to go with you. In the spirit of Jesus, share your heart burdens and concerns. If you have wronged your brother or sister, ask for forgiveness. Pray together, seeking a heart of love toward one another. If this does not work, bring the entire situation to the larger body of the church through the church board. The purpose of all of this protocol is to achieve the unity that comes through Christ’s grace.

Consider This: In Christ the walls that separate us are broken down. Jesus’ longing for His church is for members to respect one another and live in Christian love and unity. As we attempt to apply the principles of Matthew 18 to our personal relationships within the church, what are some of the key factors that determine a successful outcome of carrying out what Jesus says?

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Thought Questions:

❶ If we forgive someone who has deeply wronged us when he or she has not asked for, or desired, forgiveness, does that justify what that individual has done to us? Why, or why not?

❷ What if you know you should forgive someone for what he or she has done to you, but you have no desire to forgive? What do you do when you know the right thing to do is to forgive but you just can’t?

❸ Why is it hypocritical to tell someone you forgive him or her when the attitudes toward this person have not changed in your heart?

Application Questions:

1 Read Luke 23:32–34 and Ephesians 4:26–28. How do the principles in these passages help you to answer the above questions?

2 What effect do our choices have upon our thoughts? How can our feelings actually change if we act upon that which we know to be right?

3 Why are restored relationships vitally important in the context of revival and reformation?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The situation described below is imaginary, but it certainly could be real. Situations like this regularly occur. Ask your class to apply the principles that we learned from our lesson to this situation.

Mr. Sanders has been estranged from his daughter for many years. He is divorced from her mother, and his daughter talks to him only occasionally. She still calls to wish him a happy birthday but does not want to spend any time with him. He was particularly harsh throughout her childhood and disciplined her severely. Within the last year, he has become a Seventh-day Adventist Christian and longs for a new relationship with his daughter. He comes to you for counsel.

What do you tell him? What questions might you ask him? How can he take practical steps to heal this broken relationship?
