

September 4, 2026

Matthew 18:15-20 “Restorative Justice”

I’ve been in full-time pastoral ministry for thirty-four years now. In that thirty-four years I have only pastored two churches – First Christian Church in Pearisburg, Virginia and First Christian Church here in Chico. I took a nine-year detour as an Associate Regional Minister for our denomination in Virginia, but I count that as pastoral ministry too, it’s just that I had 170 churches under my care, and I learned some of the best tricks of the trade from their pastors. In my earliest days at First Christian in Pearisburg, I had a clergy mentor named Jack Musick. He was pastor of the Disciples church in the neighboring town of Narrows. Now, in order to have standing in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) you are required to have a Master of Divinity degree. But Jack was ordained in the 1960s when you were only required to have a Bachelor’s of Divinity degree. Jack was “grandfathered” in if that makes sense. He met the requirements for 1960, but not for 1996. Because of this, most of the clergy folk on my ordination committee weren’t too sure about letting Jack be my mentor. But the Regional Minister who had known Jack for years said, “Oh, he’ll be perfect for Jesse.”

Jack, who was a recovering alcoholic that spent his younger years as a truck driver was not politically correct by any stretch of the imagination. He smoked like a chimney and lived on a diet of fried food with a side of gravy. But he was a great mentor because he knew how to be an effective pastor in a small-town Appalachian Disciples church. And I know a lot of you have heard about him before in my sermons, but I have to bring him up now and then so that you understand the lessons I learned during the foundational years of my ministry. Or to put it another way, you’ll learn why I am the way I am.

One day, during our weekly meeting, he said, “Boy, one of the things you need to learn about church folks is that they like to tattle.” Tattle? “Yes. And don’t get that mixed up with gossip. It’s similar, but with a twist. See, gossip is just gossip. Tattling is when someone gossips about

them, and it pisses them off and they want the pastor to do something about it.” And I apologize for the salty language. Remember, Jack was a truck driver. I’m just repeating what he told me. Of course as a seminarian, I was taking classes in communication and conflict resolution, so I said, “Oh! You’re talking about a punitive triangulation.” He gave me this look like, “Are you correcting me, boy?” Then he said, “No, they’re tattling.”

And you know what? He was spot-on right! I think the only other vocation that deals with that much tattling is a kindergarten teacher. And it wasn’t unique to pastoral ministry either! When I was working for the regional church and was called in to do conflict resolution, there was tattling there too! More sophisticated tattling. You know, a punitive communication triangle. But there it was.

This must have been an issue in Jesus’ time too, because here in Matthew’s gospel he addresses it in very specific terms. If someone sins against you, work it out with that person one-on-one. Don’t gossip *or* tattle. Keep it between you and the other person. Now ... if that solves the matter, you’re good to go. It stops there. However, if that person decides to keep on sinning against you, take two others with you so you’ve got witnesses. And if that doesn’t work? Jesus says, “Let such a one be to you as a Gentile or a tax-collector.” Now there are issues with that last sentence that I don’t want to get into here but suffice it to say it’s no surprise this comes from Matthew’s very Jewish-flavored gospel.

When someone sins against us, our instinct is usually, “How do I make sure they get what’s coming to them?” And if we’re being honest, sometimes we don’t even need to be the person who was hurt. Sometimes we just want to make sure people get what they deserve. Which is probably why church people tattle to the pastor, or little kids tattle to the teacher. They want someone who they think has the authority to punish will give their adversary what they deserve. See, *our* first instinct is punishment. But *Jesus’* first instinct is *restoration*. The purpose of confronting someone who has sinned against us isn’t

humiliation, or punishment, or winning. It's, "If the member listens to you, you have *regained* that one."

That's an interesting definition of justice. In Jesus' understanding, justice isn't simply about making sure the guilty party suffers. Justice is about repairing what has been broken and restoring people to community. It's about fairness. And God's fairness is shaped by restoration, mercy, generosity, and provision. It's not about making sure everyone gets what we think they deserve.

Wouldn't it be nice if we lived a life that is free from the exhausting business of always keeping score? Wouldn't it be nice if our first inclination was restoration instead of punishment? See, when someone hurts us, we remember it. Sometimes for a long time. We replay the conversation over and over in our heads. Then we tell someone else what happened. And then maybe we tell a *dozen* other people. And if you interpreted that to mean "gossip," yeah! You're right! We keep track of the people in our lives who apologize and the ones who don't. We watch closely to see if they get what's coming to them. But this takes so much time and effort! And without us even thinking about it that person, who we believe has wronged us, has taken up residence in our head. They're like a psychological squatter.

Okay, so let's take a look at this "restorative justice" that Jesus is talking about here. Restorative justice does not mean we just pretend that nothing happen. Jesus doesn't say, "If someone sins against you, just let it go." No, he says, "Go to that person." Something happened. It matters. The relationship has been damaged. But instead of building a case against the other person, Jesus says start by trying to repair what has been broken. That's an important distinction.

Jesus' model of restoration stops little problems from becoming big ones. How many conflicts become inflated because no one simply talks to the person involved? Instead, we talk to our spouses, or our friends. Or we tattle to the preacher or the teacher or the boss or whoever else we

think might dole out some punishment. We talk to everyone except the one we're *supposed* to – the person who we feel wronged us. And before long, something that could have been handled in a 10-minute conversation has become a major church conflict.

This drives Regional Ministers crazy. All four Regional Ministers I've ever worked with in my 34 years of ministry have all said that too many churches have split down the middle and died because two people weren't willing to sit down and work things out without recruiting the entire congregation.

See, restoration gives people the opportunity to change. If our goal is punishment, we freeze a person in their worst moment. That's the person who hurt me. That's the person who said that awful thing. That's the person who wasn't there for me. That's the person who made that mistake. But restoration says, "Never judge a person by their best or worst moment." Sure, you did something wrong, but you are not permanently defined by the worst thing you've done." It makes life fuller because it allows us to live with actual human beings rather than demanding perfection from everyone around us.

Restoration creates stronger relationships. This is the hardest one. Some folks think that avoiding conflict is what preserves relationships. But honestly, it does the opposite. Avoidance creates resentment, suspicion, distance and just plain awkwardness. When we're focused on restoration the relationships can be stronger because it survived honesty.

I think one of the reasons Jesus calls us toward restoration is because this way of living actually makes for a better life. Think about the people you have known for years who are still carrying around something that happened twenty years ago. They remember exactly what was said. They remember where they were sitting. They remember who was there and what the weather was like that day. And somewhere along the way, they decided that the person who hurt them doesn't *deserve* to be forgiven—or doesn't deserve to be restored. And you know what? Maybe they're

right. Maybe that person really did something terrible. But here's the problem: when we spend our lives waiting for people to get what they deserve, we can become prisoners of the very things that happened to us. We keep score. We keep records. We build our cases.

Jesus offers another possibility. He doesn't tell us to pretend that nothing happened. He doesn't say that sin doesn't matter. He says, "Go to the person." Deal with it. Tell the truth. Try to repair what has been broken. Because healthy relationships aren't ones where nobody ever hurts others. Healthy relationships are relationships where people have learned how to repair the damage. And I think that makes life fuller. Because when restoration becomes more important than punishment, we don't have to spend our lives keeping score. We can tell the truth. We can hold people accountable. We can acknowledge the harm that has been done. But we can also leave room for people to change. And the truth is, that's what we hope God will do for us too.