

## **Talking about Accountability and Conflict:**

### **A Dramatic Encounter with Jesus**

*Scene: Jesus sits down at the front and teaches about what to do when a brother or sister sins against you. Peter (from the congregation) gets up and approaches Jesus privately to discuss Jesus' teaching.*

**Jesus (Matthew 18:15-19):** If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together. If they listen to you, then you've won over your brother or sister. But if they won't listen, take with you one or two others so that every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses. But if they still won't pay attention, report it to the congregation. If they won't pay attention even to the congregation, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector. I assure you that whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. And whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I assure you that if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, then my Father who is in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I'm there with them.

*Peter gets up from the congregation to ask Jesus follow-up questions.*

**Peter:** Jesus?

**Jesus:** Oh, hey Peter! How's it going?

**Peter:** Oh, alright, but I wanted to ask you some questions about what you were just saying, about what to do when a brother or sister sins against you.

**Jesus:** Wait. Don't tell me, you and Philip have been yelling at each other again? You two really just need

to take a break from that game you've been playing. What's it called again?

**Peter:** "Pebbles, stones, and pawns."<sup>1</sup>

**Jesus:** Have there been a few too many stones thrown lately?

**Peter:** No, Lord. Philip does annoy me sometimes, and our games can get passionate, but it's not that.

**Jesus:** Well, what is it then?

**Peter:** The other day, I overheard James talking to Andrew about me behind my back.

**Jesus:** [*Sadly*] Oh.

**Peter:** He was complaining about me saying, [*mockingly*] "He's always sucking up to Jesus to get in his good books." They didn't know, but I heard every word.

**Jesus:** I'm sorry, Peter. That must have hurt.

**Peter:** It did. But I'm not surprised. This kind of talk isn't coming out of the blue. James and I have had a bit of a rivalry going on for some time. Conflict is not new to us.

**Jesus:** I've noticed.

**Peter:** And when it's come to fighting for your attention, James and I often clash. I know I'm not innocent in the matter, but I still don't think it was right for James to talk about me behind my back.

**Jesus:** I agree, Peter. Gossip never helps.

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<sup>1</sup> This is actually a reference to an ancient Greek game that was later adapted into a form played by Romans. See <https://sites.google.com/site/boardandpieces/list-of-games/petteia-and-latrunculi>

**Peter:** I was already daydreaming how I could get revenge the next time he's nice to you: [*Sarcastically*] "Wow James, your so kind and obedient." But, when I heard you talking about what to do if a brother sins against you, I couldn't help but think maybe I need to take your advice and just go talk to James privately.

**Jesus:** Good! I'm glad you aren't choosing revenge...So, what's stopping you?

**Peter:** I'm nervous - I don't know how this will play out. Plus, while I appreciate your advice, I feel like there are a lot of things that you didn't account for.

**Jesus:** Like what?

**Peter:** Well, myself for instance. I'm not sure if I have it in me to talk to James without throwing stones of my own. I'm feeling pretty upset about it. If revenge isn't an option, maybe its best I just pretend it didn't happen...ignore it...ignore James.

**Jesus:** Peter... ignoring this issue won't help - it will just delay until things get even worse. Plus, if the problem stews long enough, it won't be affecting only you two anymore but our whole community. Don't avoid dealing with this problem now when you've already taken the first wonderful step in solving it.

**Peter:** What first step? And how is it wonderful?

**Jesus:** Well, you're holding yourself accountable by recognizing your own role in the conflict and you're not rushing into a confrontation with James. It's called self-awareness, Peter, and it's a wonderful gift that will set you up well for talking to James. [Pause] You know how I often go away on my own to pray?

**Peter:** Yes.

**Jesus:** During those times I ask the Father to help me understand myself - my motivations and my longings. And then I ask for guidance for dealing with the conflicts in my own life. Have you noticed that I get into conflicts with my brothers too?

**Peter:** I have, actually - quite often.

**Jesus:** I have to be careful too, you know. Sometimes it's tempting to focus on the actions and intentions of others before your own. Do you remember that time some of my fellows brought a woman before me that they had claimed was caught in the act of adultery?

**Peter:** How could I forget. That was a tense situation. They had those stones ready to throw and everything...

**Jesus:** The men gave the appearance of wanting to obey the law and deal with sin, but it was *their own* sin that they were avoiding - they used their power over that woman to make it seem like they loved God's law - but all the while they were hiding from themselves and their own sin. That's why I said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw the stone." (John 8:7) Addressing sin begins with looking inward and understanding yourself.

**Peter:** Ok, so I've taken the first "wonderful" step, I've looked inward, but now what?

**Jesus:** Well, now that you've thought about your role leading up to this conflict, do you feel you are ready to talk to James without throwing stones?

**Peter:** I think so. But, Jesus, [*Exasperated*] what if he doesn't listen?

**Jesus:** Did you hear what I said before?

**Peter:** Something about bringing one or two more witnesses to help...

**Jesus:** Hey, you were listening! People in conflict are often so confident of their own rightness that they refuse to admit to their own faults. Sometimes it's helpful to have a third or fourth party to help resolve a conflict between people.

**Peter:** But, Jesus, if *I* bring one or two witnesses, won't James feel ganged up on?

**Jesus:** He might, you're right. I suggest you ask people that James knows care about him, and that all of you bring a desire for both truth-telling *and* restoration to the discussion. This isn't about bringing anybody down, its about repairing a broken relationship.

**Peter:** Ok. Let's say we all come with the right attitude, what if James still refuses to listen?

**Jesus:** Well, what do you think?

**Peter:** Well...you said to tell it to the whole congregation, so I guess we'll do that.  
[*Enthusiastically*] We'll drag James up in front of everyone and make him confess to his gossip! That'll teach him.

**Jesus:** You're sounding a bit vindictive, there, Peter. Shaming people will never help resolve a conflict. I'm not talking about publicly humiliating anyone; I'm talking about truth-telling and seeking the guidance of the gathered community to work towards reconciliation. If you bind yourselves to this task together, God will honour that work.

**Peter:** Ok, but what if even that doesn't work? What if, despite the best efforts of the congregation showing love and care, James still refuses to acknowledge what

he did? What was your next step? Something like "treat that one like a Gentile or a tax collector?"

**Jesus:** So...what do you think that means?

**Peter:** Ah! I know, [*Excitedly*] we don't shame him, we shun him! [*Staccato*] Ex-commu-ni-cation! He's like a Gentile so, we can tell him that he now belongs outside of the assembly of our community.

**Jesus:** Peter?

**Peter:** Mmhm?

**Jesus:** I don't think James' sin warrants excommunication. That's an extreme course of action needed in rare situations where it is harmful for individuals and the community to have the offender stay. But even then, shunning is *not* part of my Good News. Have you noticed how I treat Gentiles and Tax Collectors? How I eat with them and show them love while still holding them accountable for their actions?

**Peter:** Oh. Yeah. [*Pause*] Jesus?

**Jesus:** Yes.

**Peter:** How am I going to forgive James *if he does* apologize?

**Jesus:** You say, "James, I forgive you. From now on let's hold each other accountable to a better way."

**Peter:** Just like that? Forget the hurt and forgive?

**Jesus:** Peter, forgiveness is not about forgetting, it's about moving forward with greater intention, accountability, and hope. Conflict is messy and often there is no quick fix. Reconciliation will be an

ongoing process and it may take some time before hurt fades.

**Peter:** And what if James talks about me behind my back again? Am I supposed to forgive him again?

**Jesus:** Peter?

**Peter:** Yes?

**Jesus:** I'm sorry to say it, but you have not lived through your last sin yet either. Soon you will have to face your sins again, but I want you to know that I will forgive you even then *and* I will ask you once more to do better.

**Peter:** I think I'm beginning to understand, Lord.

**Jesus:** Are you ready to talk to James?

**Peter:** I think so.

**Jesus:** Alright, go do that.

*Peter gets up to leave*

**Jesus:** Oh, and Peter?

**Peter:** Yes, Lord?

**Jesus:** I know your name literally means "Stone," but how about you keep those stones on the ground?

*FIN*

## Questions for Worship Response:

1. What struck you most about the dialogue between Jesus and Peter regarding Mt. 18? Did you identify with Peter at any point?
2. Discuss this statement: Conflict can be a *gift/opportunity* for growth.
3. Anabaptist-Mennonite communities have often struggled with accountability and conflict, swinging either between **avoidance** or **shunning/excommunication/schism**. How do you think modern-day Mennonite communities could do better and perhaps are doing better with handling conflict?
4. The advice Jesus gives in this passage is for dealing with **inter-personal matters** of conflict between peers in a congregation of believers. How do you think Jesus' advice would change if he were asked to resolve issues of conflict caused by sin in the church where there were **power imbalances** at play? For example, in situations of abuse or other forms of harm, it would be wrong and even dangerous for the church to expect the abused to confront their abuser "privately" or "on their own."
5. Can you imagine an application of Jesus' suggestion that offenders be treated like "a Gentile or a tax collector" in a modern church context?
  - a. If no ideas come up here, loop back to question three. Discuss scenarios where an offense may warrant "excommunication," while also imagining restorative possibilities outside of the community through something like "Circles of Support and Accountability." Here is their mission statement: Grounded in restorative justice principles, Circles of Support and



Accountability (CoSA) reduces sexual victimization by assisting people who have committed sexual offences to lead responsible, constructive, and accountable lives in their communities.