

“I Will Pass Over You”

Exodus 12:1-14 • Psalm 149 • Romans 13:8-14 • Matthew 18:15-20

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We’re going to learn about the institution of the Passover celebration – one of the most important annual festivals for the Jewish people – in a little bit, but before we go there, we’ve got a very hard teaching that we need to consider from Matthew’s Gospel, from the lips of Jesus himself.

Matthew 18:15 begins: “If your brother or sister sins against you...” By “brother or sister,” Jesus is not talking about your *family*; he’s talking about the members of the church, the “brothers and sisters” who come together week after week to worship our Lord. Jesus knew there would be times when one person in the church would say or do something hurtful to another. There are examples of this in the New Testament. James and John, two of Jesus’ disciples, asked Jesus to place them “one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” (Mark 10:37) Jesus did not grant their request, but the other ten disciples heard about it, and “began to be angry with James and John” because of it. (Matthew 10:41) In the early church, there was a heated argument between Paul and Barnabas about who to take with them on a journey; “the disagreement became so sharp that they parted company,” Paul going one direction with Silas, and Barnabas going a different direction with John Mark. (Acts 15:39) In the church in Philippi, there was a public dispute between two women; it was so pronounced that it came to Paul’s attention while he was in prison! In his letter to that church, he said: “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.” (Philippians 4:2) These women are remembered two thousand years later *only* because of the beef they had with one another! So when Jesus says, “If your brother or sister sins against you,” he was talking about a real phenomenon: Christians in the church don’t always get along well with one another. It was true then; it is true now; just because it happens from time to time doesn’t mean there’s something fundamentally wrong with the church, or the people in it. It’s been part of the church’s DNA from our very earliest days.

But Jesus does give some very clear instructions on what to *do* when there is division, conflict, and hurt feelings in the church community. He briefly outlines a series of steps, in four fairly succinct sentences: “If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector.” We owe a debt of gratitude to the Mennonites, for they have given more thought over a longer period of time to how to apply this teaching of Jesus Christ in real life more than most other branches of the Christian church put together, and have developed a set of guidelines based on these basic steps that many other denominations, including our own, have adopted as well. As I walk through the steps that Jesus

outlined, I'm also going to share the more detailed version that the Mennonite Church has developed.

First and foremost: "go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." This is where most major crises in the church begin. Our natural, human tendency is to complain to other people about the harm that has been done, rather than go to the person who harmed us. Our society does this to an enormous degree; it's the culture we live in; yet we Christians are called to live differently. The Mennonites flesh out this step like this: (1) "Go directly to those with whom we disagree; avoid behind-the-back criticism." (2) "Go in gentleness, patience and humility. Place the problem between us at neither doorstep and own our part in the conflict instead of pointing out the others'." (3) "Listen carefully, summarize and check out what is heard before responding. Seek as much to understand as to be understood." (4) "Suspend judgments, avoid labeling, end name calling, discard threats and act in a nondefensive, nonreactive way." (5) "Work through the disagreements constructively." I'm going to give you a couple handouts in a few minutes so you don't have to write this all down. The basic point here is, if you've been hurt, don't *hurt back*. Try to resolve the matter in a *constructive* way.

Next, Jesus says: "If you are listened to, you have regained that one." This is the goal – a peaceful reconciliation. When it happens, *rejoice!* But sometimes the private, one-on-one conversation isn't successful at resolving the problem. Jesus says: "But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses." There are times when a mediator is necessary. The Mennonites describe this step like this: "Be open to accept skilled help. If we cannot reach agreement among ourselves, we will use those with gifts and training in mediation in the larger church." Again, the goal is *reconciliation*.

But even a meeting with a skilled mediator sometimes doesn't resolve the issue. Jesus says: "If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector." When he says, "tell it to the church," he means it's time to call in some more people who are in recognized positions of leadership and responsibility. The Mennonites describe it like this: "We will trust the community and if we cannot reach agreement or experience reconciliation, we will turn the decision over to others in the congregation or from the broader church. In one-to-one or small group disputes, this may mean allowing others to arbitrate. In congregational, conference district or denominational disputes, this may mean allowing others to arbitrate or implementing constitutional decision-making processes, insuring that they are done in the spirit of these guidelines, and abiding by whatever decision is made." In our Presbyterian world, we have a Mediation Team serving the whole presbytery – all 60 churches in southwest and central Michigan. We also have a formal disciplinary process involving a Judicial Commission that can be used as a measure of last resort. This process is described in great detail in the *Book of Discipline*, which is in our Book of Order, Part III of our Church Constitution.

I mentioned that there would be some handouts. You're getting two handouts that are very similar. One is from the Mennonite Church USA, called "Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love,"¹ which is the document I have been quoting; the other is from our Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, and is called "Seeking to Be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians in Times of Disagreement."² The Presbyterian document is adapted from the Mennonite one. Both contain a lot of commentary and scripture references, and I would heartily encourage every member of the church to read both.

¹ <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/resource-portal/resource/agreeing-and-disagreeing-in-love/>

² <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/seeking-to-be-faithful-together-guidelines-for-presbyterians-in-times-of-disagreement/>

Now let's go back to Egypt. We left Moses last week at the burning bush, talking with God. You all probably know what happened next. Moses returned to Egypt. He and his brother Aaron went to Pharaoh to ask permission to take the Israelites on a brief sojourn into the desert for a religious festival. Pharaoh not only said no, he made life even harder for the enslaved Israelites. God then sent a series of plagues upon Egypt, a combination of miracles and disasters, to demonstrate God's mighty power and to persuade Pharaoh to let the Israelite people go. The Nile River turned to blood; frogs, gnats, and flies covered the land; livestock suffered disease; boils festered on both humans and animals; hail poured from the sky; locusts devoured the plants and fruit; and then a dense darkness came over the land for three days. Finally, when Pharaoh continued to refuse to grant freedom to the Israelites, God announced one final disaster: "About midnight I will go out through Egypt. Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill and all the firstborn of the livestock. Then there will be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again." But while the Egyptian people suffered, God would keep the Israelites safe.

God told Moses to instruct the Israelite people to "take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household," either a sheep or a goat. On the 14th day of that month, each household would slaughter the lamb at twilight, then "take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it." They were to "eat the lamb that same night ... roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs." God said: "I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human to animal, and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments.... The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt." This "passing over" the Israelites on God's part came to be called the "Passover." God told the Israelites to commemorate this Passover forever: "You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance." And so it happened: "At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon and all the firstborn of the livestock.... There was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead." Pharaoh "summoned Moses and Aaron in the night and said, 'Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! ... And ask a blessing for me, too!'" The Israelites are finally given freedom from their chains. Pharaoh would change his mind and chase after them – but that's a story for next time.

And so the festival of Passover was born. A year later, while they were in the wilderness, the Israelites celebrated their first commemorative Passover celebration, remembering the remarkable events that led to their freedom. To this day, Jews around the world still celebrate Passover, to remember the mighty deliverance they received from almighty God. It's a spring festival, celebrated on the 15th day of the month of Nisan in the Hebrew calendar, which falls between March 26 and April 25. It's always near our celebration of Easter, which falls between March 22 and April 25. That shouldn't be a surprise, for the Gospels tell us that Jesus was put to death at the time of the Passover festival. So of course Easter and Passover would fall at the same time of year. Indeed, in John's Gospel, Jesus is put to death "on the day of Preparation for the Passover" – the very day when the Jews would be sacrificing the lambs for their Passover celebrations. The blood of those Passover lambs saved the Israelites when they were in bondage in Egypt. The blood of Jesus Christ, *our* Passover lamb, saves us as well: it saves us from our bondage to sin and death. Just as the Passover lambs brought freedom and life to the Israelites, so too does *our* Passover lamb, Jesus Christ, bring *us* freedom and life as well.

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