

Sermon for Sunday, October 8, 1972 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"HOW TO GET ALONG WITH PEOPLE"

St. Matthew 18:15-22

Text: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother."  
St. Matthew 18:15

The title of the sermon this morning implies that I know something about getting along with people and that I practice what I know. I want to begin by confessing that as a minister I am often guilty of asking others to do what I say and not what I actually do! As a matter of fact, it has been the occasional breakdown in my relationship to others that drove me back to the Bible to look for some remedies and which has led to this sermon today. Today's sermon is a case of looking at the log in my own eye and of the physician prescribing for his own healing. I invite you to listen in as I talk to myself and perhaps we will both learn something from God's Word.

In the passage I read this morning from St. Matthew, Jesus suggests four basic principles for getting along with people. You may want to write the title of this sermon in the margin of your Bible and then mark the four passages. They are verse 15, verse 19, verse 20, and finally verses 21-22. Incidentally, verses 23-35 is an illustration by Jesus of what happens when you don't practice the fourth principle.

Let's begin with verse 15. Here we are introduced to the principle of confrontation. The verse reads, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone...." In effect, Jesus says if there is trouble between you and another person, the first thing to do is go talk to him about it privately. There are two good reasons for doing this. One of the reasons is what happens to me if I don't confront the other person. First, this thing begins to build up inside of me. Soon it is all I can think about. What may have started out as a small thing begins to be built up all out of proportion. Your stomach gets tied in knots, your blood pressure goes up, and you begin to have serious physical and emotional by-products. I have known people who have actually had to go to bed physically ill because of something building up inside.

The second thing that happens to me if I don't follow the command of Jesus to confront the other person is that my perspective on life begins to get out of balance. Soon we are walking around with a chip on our shoulder just looking for someone to knock it off. And, strangely enough, when we have that sort of attitude, there's always someone to knock that chip off. Have you known some "chip-on-the-shoulder" people? No matter what you say or do they read some interpretation into it so that their feelings are hurt.

A third thing that happens to me when I refuse to obey the command of Jesus is that it makes me insensitive to the feelings of others. I'm so concerned about how I feel and what others are thinking about me, that I become insensitive to others. When that happens people begin to avoid us. Most of us don't like to be around people who are always centered in on themselves.

So, Jesus gives us the principle of confrontation: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone...." And one of the reasons for doing that is because of what happens to me if I don't. The second reason for obeying the command of Jesus is because of what it does for the other person. When you confront another person about his offense you may discover one of several things. You may discover, for example, that he did not mean what he said

or did in the way you took it or in the spirit that you understood it. Again, you may discover that even if he did mean it at the time, he is already sorry for saying it. Not many of us set out deliberately to hurt another person's feelings. Most of us say or do things on impulse and then we could bite our tongues! So, you may discover that the other person is already looking for a way to make amends or apologize to you. When you go to him about it, it opens the door for him to ask forgiveness. Then, finally, to go to the other person helps you understand him better. He may have just cause for what he did or said. There may be a very real difference between you. But to talk it over makes you both feel better toward one another and helps dilute the deep feelings involved.

But this leads us into principle two found in verse 19. There we read, "Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven." Here we are introduced to the principle of agreement. The word "agree" has implications--it implies give and take; it implies the reconciliation between two people about differences they have. In the denomination today there is a lot of talk about reconciliation between liberals and conservatives. The only problem is, the liberals mean by reconciliation for the conservatives to accept their position!

Agreement--or reconciliation--is terribly important, especially in the church. All of us come here this morning with different motives, different needs, different priorities, different convictions. Yet, if the church is to make an effective witness to the world, we must have agreement together. As long as any one person is determined to have his way at whatever costs, there can be no agreement in the church.

But it is not only true in the church, it is true in marriage, it is true in youth-parent relationships, it is true in a human relationship. You see, as long as I recognize that I have differences with you and as long as I am trying to work out some agreement with you, I am recognizing your worth as a person, I am taking you seriously as a human being. But when it has to be my way only, I am putting you down--I am ignoring your feelings and denying the dignity of your personhood.

Closely tied in with the principle of agreement is the third principle found in verse 20. There we read, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." This introduces us to the principle of worship. If you will look about you this morning you will find all sorts of people--they are tall and short, fat and thin, young and old, male and female, rich and well, not-so-rich. We have different educations, different political parties, and we differ in hundreds of ways. Yet, we all have one thing in common that binds us with a common bond--we have all come together in the name of Jesus--we all share a common need for his love and forgiveness.

Let me make a suggestion to you. If you are not getting along with someone, try sitting with them next Sunday. If you aren't getting along with your wife or husband, try sharing your hymnbook, hold hands during the prayers. You will discover when church is over that you feel differently toward one another. Why? Because Jesus promises us that when we worship together in his name that his presence is in the midst of us. And where Jesus is, there is love and healing. We may disagree on politics, on the preacher, on how the Sunday school is run, or a thousand other things. But if we agree to worship together, something new enters our relationship--it is the promise of Jesus that he will be in the midst of us.

These first three principles imply that all of our problems and differences with others can be worked out. If we use them, most of them can. But the fact is, we

will still have problems and difficulties with others that can't be worked out by these principles. That isn't because the principles are wrong. No, it is because we are still sinful human beings who will fail to use them or misuse them. So Jesus gives us one final principle for getting along with others. He says, in response to a question from Peter about how often to forgive, that we are to simply keep on forgiving. "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" And Jesus replies to Peter, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." Here, then, we are finally introduced to the principles of forgiveness. When all else has failed in our relationship to others, Jesus gives us forgiveness.

After Holy Communion last Sunday one of our members shared an experience with me. She said that as the Elders began to serve the elements she suddenly realized that the man who would serve her was a man towards whom she had some hard feelings. She asked God to help her and suddenly was filled with love and forgiveness. When he arrived at her pew, she could take the tray from his hands in perfect fellowship. She had exercised her option to forgive.

I remember reading a story once about a farmer who had a creek going through his land. This creek was important because it provided water for his crops and was his only means of getting his crops to market. One year a barge was accidentally sunk in the creek and silt and mud began to build up around it. Soon a little island was formed. The water backed up and the creek got more shallow as the silt and mud filled in. Soon most of his land was covered with water and his only means of getting to market was gone. In desperation, he finally dynamited the old barge and opened up the channel of the creek. In a short time the creek returned to normal. So often the same thing happens to us in our relationships to each other. Something gets sunk in the channel of communication. Maybe it's a careless word, a hurt feeling, an unthinking deed. Our flow of communication is blocked and although it may not have amounted to much in the beginning, the consequences begin to build up with all sorts of serious by-products. We need to dynamite that old wreck. We need to blow that old barge out of the channel of communications. And the only sure way to do it is through forgiveness.

Yes, our Saviour gives us principles for getting along with each other--the principle of confrontation, the principle of agreement, the principle of worshipping together. And when all else fails, he gives us the principle of forgiveness. One bitter day--when all else had failed--our Saviour looked down from an agonizing cross. His eyes were dim with pain and blood and surely his heart was broken because of his rejection. Yet, from the depths of his being he lifted his eyes and spoke these words, "Father, forgive them..."

When we have learned to forgive, we will have learned how to get along with others--and we will be somewhere close to the Kingdom of God.