

### **Formula for Reconciliation**

Sylvia Jones made the best butter tarts in town – and everyone knew it. It was her contribution every Sunday for fellowship time that she would supply the treats for the congregation. So why did Josie Finley bring butter tarts last Sunday? Why not cookies or muffins? No, it had to be butter tarts! Sylvia was more than a little miffed over what happened, especially when people told Josie that her tarts were good. Right then and there, Sylvia decided that she'd stop bringing treats for Sunday morning. She wasn't into competition.

When several weeks had gone by with only tea and coffee, a concerned member spoke to Sylvia. "We really miss your butter tarts. Would you be able to bring some next week?" That made Sylvia think if what she was doing – withholding a way to make fellowship time more enjoyable – was the right thing. What if Josie didn't even know that her contribution that Sunday had gotten someone so upset? The more Sylvia thought about it, the more she realized she should speak to Josie and clear things up.

Several days later at a church meeting, the two women had the chance to discuss what had happened. Sylvia told Josie how her action that Sunday had made her feel. Josie was surprised when she heard this, unaware that bringing tarts would cause such grief with another. She apologized for the hurt she had inadvertently caused, and accepted Sylvia's desire to be reconciled. Both didn't want this small situation to escalate unnecessarily into something bigger.

The quotation from our reading, "For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them," is often used out of the context in which it appears in Matthew's gospel. It's not about worship or praise, rather it's actually the conclusion of a longer discussion on getting along with others, specifically what to do when things go wrong between people.

Jesus is saying, “You need to be reconciled and deal effectively with your differences because I’m there among you, even if only two or three are gathered together.”

Forgiveness is one of the primary ways God’s love is shown in a community of believers. It’s not a natural act, but one that must be practiced over and over in different situations. At its root is a desire to be in as peaceful a relationship that’s possible with others. Any barriers need to be dealt with immediately so that the relationship can continue. That was Jesus’ first concern when he talked about ways to manage conflict. Who is right or who is wrong wasn’t even brought up, rather specific instructions on what to do to get a broken relationship back on track. In these hypersensitive times when being right and politically correct is so important, Jesus’ advice may sound unreasonable and simplistic. But it’s the best way to move forward in God’s love. Let’s take a look at each of the three points:

1) “If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back.” (Matthew 18:15) The first step in Jesus’ formula is to talk about things openly and directly, person-to-person. Jesus wanted people who had been hurt to talk directly to the one who hurt them and to lay things out in an honest fashion, in hopes of having the issues worked out. This must be done, not in anger, but also not hiding the hurt that has been done. There are no winners or losers here, only direct communication that results in reconciliation - both parties getting back, as much as is possible, to a place of shared care and concern, of forgiveness and understanding. Jesus wants all of his followers to work together in peace, to put their differences behind them.

Notice that the person who feels the wrong is to take the first step. That’s because, as in our opening story, the one who did the wrong didn’t even realize the hurt she had caused.

2) “But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses.” (v.16) The second step is to take one or two others for another private, face-to-face meeting. This idea comes from the law of Moses, “You must not convict anyone of a crime on the testimony of only one witness. The facts of the case must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” (Deuteronomy 19:15) The other people in this step are only there to confirm that the person wronged is trying to make things right following proper procedure. The advice of several people may be considered more than the opinions of only one. Once again, the reason is to help in reconciliation, not establish who was ‘right’ and who was ‘wrong’.

3) “If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won’t accept the church’s decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector.” (v.17) The third step takes place in the presence of the *ekklesia* or gathered community where the incident is brought into public light. The people who were witnesses in step 2 may be called to give their testimony. The outcome of this, as Jesus said, might require the use of disciplinary measures such as rebuke that formally dismisses the person for a while from active fellowship. While it was hoped that things wouldn’t progress that far, provisions were made to stop the spread of bitter and resentful attitudes that could threaten the entire congregation.

Pope John XXIII had some good advice: “See everything, overlook a great deal, correct a little.” We’re to act with discretion in matters of interpersonal relationships, and take action only when we’re directly involved, not out of pride, but only from compassionate Christian love. In fact, the secret of successful reconciliation *is* love. As we heard in our epistle reading, the apostle Paul wrote, “Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfills the requirements of God’s law.”

(Romans 13:10) The love talked about here is *agape*, the love of God that cares for the other person's well being, wanting what's best for the other person, even when he or she has made you angry. Agape love will always want to be reconciled and will always accept each other's apologies because that's what people who love each other do. That's what Jesus did – and continues to do – with us every day.

If there's someone who you know holds a grudge against you for something you did, or were perceived to have done, either recently or a long time ago, apologize and sincerely ask forgiveness. Similarly, if there's someone who comes to you and asks forgiveness for something that's caused you to hold a grudge, grant that person forgiveness. This isn't weakness, nor is it condoning some wrong someone has done. But it's essential for getting past the wall of resentment and going forward to relationship renewal.

Chris Carter had worked for months drawing up a plan for a merger with a competing company. He wanted the deal to be as fair and equitable as possible so that shareholders of both parties would feel that there were no 'winners' or 'losers'. He was to present his plan to the boards of directors at the end of the week. His hope was that appreciation for his efforts might become a promotion in the future.

Chris never made the presentation. A family emergency took him out of town for the next week. Paul, an associate of his, was given the task of explaining the main points; he would fill the others in on the details once he returned. Chris was puzzled, then, that he didn't receive a call to do that in the days that followed. Why was no one coming to him for clarification? Upon investigating, he was filled with anger. Unknown to him, Paul had appeared as if *he* was the

originator of the plan and filled the board in on everything in the prospectus. To Chris, it was as if the rug had been pulled out from under him – and he knew who was to blame!

At the weekly office gathering, Chris sat as far away from Paul as possible. Only a sullen greeting was all he was able to give the person who had caused such grief. This was noticed by the floor manager who called Chris in, “What’s going on between you and Paul? People are starting to notice something’s wrong, and you know what gossip can do to the staff.” Chris briefly explained what he thought had happened and how it had made him feel. “I think you should bring this up to Paul, and the sooner the better,” was the manager’s wise advice.

A few days later Chris had the chance to speak privately with Paul. It was actually nothing as he had imagined. The directors had asked for a complete picture of the merger plan which Paul read out to them in full. At no time did he claim he was the author. Everyone was so pleased that they voted to go ahead with Chris’ idea. Paul apologized for the misconception he had given his co-worker, and Chris for imputing bad motives on his friend where there had been none. Not long after, Chris was asked to become an assistant manager for the new company.

If and when the time comes for any of us to need to resolve a conflict that can’t be overlooked, we need the faith, the courage and the common sense to act in a humble, loving way. If and when we’re approached by someone seeking forgiveness, we need to welcome the input and reward the effort in that same loving way. Seek God’s will to guide us, to help us sort out the facts, to purify our motives, and to point us toward solutions. We have Jesus’ assurance that he’s with us in every conflict. His love will see us through, “For where two or three come together in my name, I am with you.” Amen.