

## Where Two or Three are Gathered

Matthew 18:15-20

Rev. Brian Bill

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I learned a new word this week from Wikipedia, the source you can trust – *contextomy*. Contextomy (also known as *quote mining*) is a type of false attribution in which a passage is removed from its surrounding material in such a way as to distort its intended meaning. Contextomies may be both intentional as well as accidental.

One of the most familiar ways contextomy takes place is when marketers use “review blurbs” in advertising. Here’s an example. After watching a movie and not liking it, one film critic wrote, “*I couldn’t help feeling that, for all the energy, razzmatazz and technical wizardry, the audience had been shortchanged.*” This is how the studio pared it down for their publicity – “*...energy, razzmatazz and technical wizardry...*”

When people get quoted in the media, it’s common to hear them say, “*I was taken out of context!*” Here’s an actual exchange...

NEWS REPORTER: “Can you confirm the rumor of mass layoffs in the next quarter?”

COMPANY SPOKESPERSON: “There is no truth to the rumor that there will be mass layoffs in the next quarter.”

QUOTE IN NEWSPAPER: “*...there will be mass layoffs in the next quarter.*”

Let me be quick to say that reporters that I’ve known over the years have done a great job getting their facts straight.

If it’s easy to take things in our culture out of context, we must certainly be careful about taking the Word of God out of context. Someone may say to you, “*I can live however I want because the Bible says, ‘Relax, eat, drink, be merry.’*” The Bible does say that in Luke 12:19 but you should take them to the very next verse to see how that philosophy pans out: “*God says, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’*”

I believe most people accidentally, not intentionally, quote the Bible out of context. My prayer is that we will learn how to slow down and read what comes before and what comes after our favorite verses so that we can correctly interpret and then apply Scripture to our relational contexts.

We kicked off our new series called, “Context” last weekend with an introductory message to help establish that the three most important rules in Bible study are: *Context, Context, and Context!* The main thing we discovered is that we must *work hard at handling the Word of God because how we handle God’s Word determines whether we’ll be an approved worker or an ashamed wanderer.*

We were challenged from 2 Timothy 2:15 to: ***“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”***

- **Stay hungry**
- **Work hard**
- **Correctly handle**

We were also encouraged to *cross cultural rivers* and to *ask journalistic questions* – *who, what, where, when, and why.*

I also recommended that if you don’t have a study Bible consider getting one. The links for these Bibles are now posted on the Sermon Extras tab on our website as well as on the Edgewood app. I’ve also included a number of other free resources.

Check out this email I received from an Edgewood member on Sunday.

*“Oh my goodness! I bought the e-book ESV Study Bible last night. It wasn’t cheap. It is priceless. What an incredible treasure trove of information! I am reading the Bible regularly and I’m at the stage in my journey that I have sooo many questions and no one to ask. Before I didn’t know enough to wonder about all the things I wonder about now. That resource is amazing. The maps. The insights. I am bowled over...sending me to the study Bible will impact me forever.”*

One of my favorite things is to watch people get excited about the Word of God! I also love it when new people come and get saved and then baptized. A young woman was saved on Thursday afternoon! I’m also pumped that so many

Edgewood people are living on mission, in the community and right here in this room. Because of the recent growth we've been experiencing, particularly in the 10:45 service, we're asking for 50-75 people to consider migrating from this service to the 8:00 Sunday service or our Saturday night service at 5:00 pm. We've already had 10 people who are seeing their seating as a way to live on mission so that we can open up some more room.

Here's where we're headed in our series.

April 29-30 **Where Two or Three Are Gathered**

May 6-7 **The Truth Will Set You Free.** Next weekend our students will be living on mission by serving in our services. Sunday night will also be Senior Blessing Night at 6:00 pm.

May 13-14 **Train up a Child**

May 20-21 **Judge Not**

May 27-28 **Forgetting what Lies Behind**

June 3-4 **Plans to Prosper You**

June 10-11 **Money is the Root of All Evil**

June 17-18 **Be Strong and Courageous**

If you would like us to tackle an additional text that is often taken out of context, send me an email, make a note on the Connection Card, use the app, or leave a comment on the EBC Facebook page. Because of input we've already received on Facebook, we will be extending the series by at least three weeks already.

Let me also say that while this series sounds interesting, you may find yourself pushing back a bit when some of your favorite verses are unpacked in a way that may be different than you're used to. My goal is not to unsettle you or to have you no longer quote certain verses. It's actually just the opposite. My prayer is that when we understand the context of these texts, our love for these verses will only deepen as the Word becomes even dearer to us.

The text we'll be setting in context this weekend is quite popular and is found in Matthew 18:20. To see how well-known this is, I'll quote the front half and you finish it: "***For where two or three are gathered in my name...***" If you're familiar with it, go ahead and quote the rest: "***...there am I among them.***"

This verse is often connected to prayer, and while this is certainly an application, the primary meaning is much different. Speaking of prayer, the National Day of

Prayer is this Thursday. There's a prayer breakfast at the Quad Cities Prayer Center at 6:30 Thursday morning that I plan to attend and many communities in the QCA will host prayer times at noon. You can find more information on the Resource Table. I'll be gathering for prayer at the Rock Island Courthouse if you'd like to join me.

I like something David Platt said during the most recent *Secret Church* gathering: "*Our goal in Bible study is not to determine our personal meaning of a verse; our goal is to discover what the Holy Spirit meant when He gave us this chapter.*"

In the opening verses of Matthew 18, we see again that the disciples are all about who's the greatest. Jesus puts a child in their midst and tells them that they must become like children. And then in verse 6, he warns them about causing children to sin and describes what will happen to those who do so. He then challenges his followers to be severe about dealing with their own sins. In verses 12-14, he describes how a shepherd seeks after one straying sheep by leaving the 99 on the mountain so that he can go and search for the one who is in danger. There is great rejoicing when a lost sinner is reconciled and comes home.

We could summarize the first part of the chapter like this: *We must deal with our own selfishness and sins and we must also seek out those who are straying.* And then in verse 15 Jesus tells his followers what to do when someone sins against them: "*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.*"

When someone sins against us, this first step is probably the hardest. In fact, it's so difficult that it's often skipped entirely. Because of that, I'm going to spend most of my time on this one. The other reason I want to camp on this step is because I believe most conflicts can be resolved at this level, if we will just have the courage to do some "*care-fronting.*"

There are at least three ways to handle conflict and sin.

- **Peace-faking.** A peace-faker avoids conflict at all cost and behaves like a turtle in a shell. Do you try to escape conflict by acting like everything's OK?
- **Peace-breaking.** These people function more like skunks that spray everything around them when conflict hits. Do you attack when in conflict?

- **Peace-making.** This is probably the most difficult because it involves some work. But it is biblical. Peacemakers are willing to candidly discuss conflict and surface sins because it's the way to peace and reconciliation.

I see four pathways to peace in our passage. I'm going to borrow Steven Cole's helpful outline.

**1. A private meeting** (verse 15). The first path to peace is to ascertain if your brother or sister has actually sinned against you. Look at the first part of verse 15: ***"If your brother sins against you..."*** This is important because sometimes we label something as sin when it is actually a preference or a pet peeve or a personality trait or just a personal irritation that bugs us. In those instances, we're called to ***"bear with one another in love"*** according to Ephesians 4:2.

Sometimes we are called to overlook something and not say a word...if we can. Proverbs 19:11: ***"Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense."*** It would be good for us to put petty things in the "grace box" and then put it in a hard-to-reach place.

While we must bear with some things, and overlook other things when we can, we are not to put up with sin. Matt Smethurst writes: *"The church should be a safe place for sinners without being a safe place for sin."* And sometimes we can't keep our anger and animosity inside the box. If your brother or sister has sinned against you, there are two important imperatives in this verse: *Go* and *Show*.

Look at the next phrase: ***"...go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone."*** To ***"go"*** means, *"to continue to go and pursue without being distracted."* We're not to wait until he or she comes to us. The word ***"tell"*** refers to *"being convincing."* We can't be casual or indifferent and act like it will go away on its own. It won't. Don't wait for the other person to come to you or you'll be waiting a long time.

We could say it like this: *Working towards reconciliation is always my responsibility.* Whether we've sinned against someone (see Matthew 5) or we've been the one sinned against (Matthew 18), it's always our duty to go. And this first step is to be ***"between you and him alone."*** *If some bro or sis has sinned against you, he or she should be the first to know.* Conflict will not be resolved accidentally, but only intentionally. I wrote down some reasons why this is so important.

- **Avoids shame for the person.** If you go public with your offense without talking to the person about it, you can bring shame on them. The principle is to keep the circle small. Proverbs 17:9 says: ***“Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.”***
- **Minimizes misunderstandings.** Sometimes you’ll discover that you’ve been mistaken. Or maybe there’s been a simple misunderstanding that can be cleared up by simply meeting together. There’s a fascinating account in Joshua 22 when the two and a half tribes on the east side of the Jordan River constructed an altar. The other tribes went ballistic and accused them of some pretty vile things. When the two and a half tribes explained that they did it as a witness to teach their children, the issue was resolved. Interestingly, the Israelites had not only misunderstood, they had judged and threatened them. A face-to-face meeting cleared it all up.
- **Keeps you from hating the person.** Leviticus 19:17: ***“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him.”***
- **The other person may not know they’ve offended you.** Psalms 19:12 says that we all have hidden faults.
- **Limits gossip.** Unfortunately, many of us often go to others and gossip when we should be talking to the person in private about what he or she has done to us. Proverbs 25:9: ***“Argue your case with your neighbor himself, and do not reveal another’s secret.”***

Here’s a question. When’s the last time you practiced “going and showing” without saying a word to anyone else about the issue? This passage tells me that I must go *quietly*. Ephesians 4:26 says that I must do it *quickly*: ***“Do not let the sun go down on your anger.”*** And Matthew 7:5 reminds me to do it *carefully*: ***“You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”***

One pastor suggests a helpful phrase to use when we have to go and show someone his or her fault: *“Could you help me understand what happened here?”* You could also say something like: *“I’ve noticed something in your life that concerns me but I want to make sure I’m seeing things correctly. Is what I see correct?”* Another idea is to make observations instead of accusations. It’s much better to say, *“I feel like you wronged me”* than it is to say, *“You’re a liar!”*

The biggest reason for telling in private is because this will handle most every situation: ***“If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”*** If we skip this step and start telling others, we short-circuit the person’s restoration. The word ***“gain”*** is a financial term, meaning I have invested myself and now there is profit because the person has listened. Remember this: the goal is always restoration. Our aim should be to win our brother or sister, not win the argument. *Working towards reconciliation is always my responsibility.*

**2. A private conference with witnesses** (verse 16). If the person who has sinned against you does not listen when you go and show, then it’s time to increase the pressure by involving others: ***“But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”*** This is a quotation from Deuteronomy 19:15. In the Old Testament a person could not be convicted on the word of just one witness. This was for protection so that no one would pass along slanderous information that was not confirmed. Here are some other benefits to having a witness or two:

- They can establish the facts and is a way of saying, *“I’m not just making this up.”*
- They can observe the erring brother or sister’s reaction.
- Having others involved may communicate the gravity of the situation and reinforce the need for repentance.
- They can keep things from escalating.
- Witnesses can remember and record what was said.

Once again, the objective is restoration. If your spiritual sibling repents, then you must restore, stop the process, and don’t tell others about it. If he or she doesn’t, then move on to step #3. Notice that the passage moves from singular involvement to plural engagement the further you go.

**3. A public announcement to the church** (verse 17a). ***“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church...”*** This is a sober, sorrowful and serious moment and therefore should not be rushed into. This step is taken when there is continued, confirmed and unconfessed sin.

We are not to go on a witch-hunt nor are we called to be the “sin police.” Membership has its privileges *and* its responsibilities. This level, like the first two, is meant to be loving; though it may not seem like it. Again, the goal is

reconciliation. The congregation's role at this step is to plead and pray for a change of heart.

Here are some reasons why we need to pursue this step:

- Vindicates God's holiness
- Purifies the church
- Deters others from sinning
- Conveys biblical love and a pathway for restoration

**4. Public exclusion from the church (17b).** *"...And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."* A Gentile was looked down upon and a tax collector was often a Jewish traitor who worked for the Roman government. Both were outsiders.

2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 captures the heart behind church discipline: *"If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother."* The idea is that exclusion should make the believer repentant; so we should wait with open arms, loving them as outsiders to be won over. Remember that Jesus loved pagans and tax collectors.

The exact form of this exclusion is not specified but the objective once again is restoration. The word "discipline" comes from the same root as "disciple" or "teach." As parents we try to make the distinction between restorative discipline and vindictive punishment. Discipline carries with it the goal of teaching and training whereas punishment is often just an end in itself. Hebrews 12:11: *"For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."*

Now, if you're like me, this four-step process feels very intimidating, doesn't it? Knowing this, Jesus gives us two promises when we obey Him.

- **The promise of His power.** When we pursue biblical peacemaking by following these four steps, verses 18-19 tell us that what is done here is declared to be so in heaven: *"Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 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."*

Heaven itself endorses the activity of the church when discipline is done in the right way.

- **The promise of His presence.** It's taken awhile for us to set the context, but we now come to the text found in Matthew 18:20: ***“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”*** Would you first of all notice that the ***“two or three”*** are the witnesses in verse 16 and verse 19? This sounds like a nice promise for prayer but it actually breaks down, doesn't it? If God is only with us when two or three are gathered, does that mean He's not present when I pray alone? Also, this text says ***“two or three,”*** not two or more. Does that mean God is not with us when we have four or more? Of course not. God is omnipresent.

As we think about how to apply this passage, let's percolate on these questions:

- **Am I treating the other person I'm in conflict with as someone God loves?** Verse 15 uses the word ***“brother”*** twice which indicates that God does not want friction in his family. A good example of this is found in Genesis 13:8 when Abraham does some conflict resolution with his nephew Lot: ***“Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen.”***
- **Is my goal reconciliation or retaliation?** I must make sure that I don't fight or use my might because *working towards reconciliation is always my responsibility*. James 5:19-20 reminds us that we are to bring back the one who is wandering: ***“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”***
- **How's my attitude?** Before I go to a brother or sister I must make sure that I am not going with any spiritual superiority but with humility. I am to come alongside, not above the other. Galatians 6:1-3: ***“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.”*** Keep the truth of Proverbs 12:18 in mind: ***“There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”***

- **How willing am I to obey?** These commands of how to handle conflict come directly from the mouth of Jesus and as such I cannot deem optional what He has declared obligatory. This is *the* way to deal with someone who sins against us. When we disobey and default into denial or denigration, we do so at our own peril. As followers of Christ, we don't have the option of just opting out simply because it's difficult.

### **The Importance of Forgiveness**

The paths to peace are laid out for us very clearly in this passage.

1. A private meeting
2. A private conference with witnesses
3. A public announcement to the church
4. A public exclusion from the church

But there's one more thing we must do and it might be the hardest of all. When someone sins against us, we are to forgive. Right after this passage, we see in verses 21-35 that we must be willing to forgive "seventy times seven times" or "*seventy-seven times*" when someone sins against us.

C.S. Lewis once said, "*Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive.*" We are called to forgive the faults of fellow believers. And the only way we can do that is to remember how much we've been forgiven. There are two Greek words for forgiveness. One refers to debts that have been paid or canceled in full. The other means to bestow favor freely or unconditionally. We're to go so we can let go *and* we're to love so we can leave the hurts. *Working towards reconciliation is always my responsibility.*

The Peacemaker ministry describes forgiveness as a decision involving four promises ([www.peacemaker.net](http://www.peacemaker.net)):

- **"I will not dwell on this incident."**
- **"I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you."**
- **"I will not talk to others about this incident."**
- **"I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship."**

This is exactly what God has done for us, and it is what he calls us to do for others. It's the way of a peacemaker. And when we do what we're called to do, we have the promise of His power and of His presence.

Here are three action steps...

- Contact a wanderer this week. *Do you know anyone who is straying like a lost sheep?*
- Confront an erring brother or sister this week. *Is there anyone who has sinned against you?*
- Confess your sins to someone you may have hurt. *Is there anyone who's pulled back from you?*

Almost 115 years ago a large statue of Christ was erected high in the Andes on the border between Argentina and Chile as a symbol of a peaceful resolution of a border dispute between the two countries. The statue is called *Christ the Redeemer of the Andes* and is constructed of cannons that were used in war. The statue serves as a pledge that there will be peace between Chile and Argentina. Shortly after it was erected, the Chileans began to protest that they had been slighted because the statue had its back to Chile. As tempers were high and tension was thick, a newspaper editorial in Chile saved the day with these words: *"It's OK. The people of Argentina need more watching over than the Chileans."* Those wise words, combined with some humor, took the heat off.

The Cross and the Empty Tomb stand as symbols of a far deeper reality. Jesus Christ gave His life and was raised from the dead to grant reconciliation and peace. As His followers, let's grant the same to others, knowing that we have the promise of His power and His presence: ***"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."***