

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“Fighting for the Kingdom”**  
**Matthew 18:15-20**

Matthew 18 is another one of Jesus’ great sermons in Matthew. We spent three weeks on the Sermon on the Mount... But that’s just the first of 5 of Jesus’ sermons in Matthew, or what are sometimes called the 5 Discourses. Each of these has a difference emphasis... a different topic.

And this sermon here, in Mathew 18, is devoted to the Christian community. Speaking to his disciples, Jesus lets them know that their faith is not a private matter. It’s not something they can do simply by themselves, all alone under a tree.

Their life in Christ is a community affair,  
something that happens when two or three of them are gathered together in his name. *That* is when he promises to be in their midst. Not necessarily when they are off by themselves feeling holy.

**The thing is, if we’re going to be together very long, [playfully]  
then we’re bound to irritate one another.**

You know how irritating people can be, right? The great philosopher, Linus Van Pelt, puts it best. Holding his little blue blanket Linus says, “I Love humankind. It’s people I can’t stand.”

That’s how we are.

**And that is** why, actually, we so desperately need one another. In community, we help each other get past our ideals and pulled back into reality. We rub the rough edges off each other... the way tumbling stones do in a jar.

The stones smooth each other out... but it only works if they keep bumping into each other again and again. A stone in the jar all by itself never changes, does it?

And so, Jesus teaches us to keep bumping into each other,  
because in all that friction, something holy is taking place.

Or to put it more plainly, Jesus is teaching us how to fight because fighting is holy business.

Which is kind of strange when you think about it, isn’t it? We think about Jesus teaching us how to love, and how to have compassion, and how to have patience. But we don’t tend to think of Jesus as a fighting coach, do we?

Maybe that’s because fighting is too messy for our version of Jesus... or our kind of Christianity. We want a Christianity that is more in control than all that...more put together.

Or maybe we’re pretty mean when it comes to fighting and it’s hard to find anything holy in the midst of a boxing match with your spouse, or your co-workers, or in a fight with your fellow church members.

Fighting and Jesus... well, they don’t go together in our minds too often do they? I mean, I bet no one in the last week thought to themselves, **“You know what, for Lent this year, I think I’ll take up fighting.”** Of course not. Because most people think of fighting as pretty unspiritual stuff,

something Christians aren't supposed to do,  
certainly, something that isn't supposed to happen in the church.

And most people... are wrong.  
Fighting, in fact, is deeply spiritual business.

In one of Jesus' five major sermons in Matthew, he starts coaching us how to fight... because for Christians, learning to fight is the only way we learn how to stay a community... it is as important as any baseball team learning to bat.

There's some skill to it.  
It takes regular practice.

And even the best players need on-going coaching... Jesus is coaching us into, not away from conflict.

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Now, I have to admit to you, that just saying all that... makes me squirm inside. Because the honest truth is, I hate conflict! It's probably something you should know about your pastor. There is nothing that drains the life out of me more than conflict. In fact, I've told some of my friends along the way that when someone is angry with me... all that emotional energy can feel like I'm being punched in the chest and gut. It's a deeply physical feeling of assault for me and it exhausts all my resources.

**I hate conflict.**  
**My first impulse is to avoid it or run away from it all.**  
**I mean, who wants to walk right into a sucker punch?**

So, my natural tendency is to avoid all that conflict... to stay hiding in the dugout and not mess with all that swinging the bat business. Only I've learned that's not such a good strategy. Because there in the dugout I can get sulky and cynical...

In fact, there's a good chance I'll even sabotage my team with a little passive aggressive behavior. Not that I mean to. It just comes out in my avoiding the conflict.

How about you?  
I know some of you are similar.

But I also know some of you are not. Some of you are the more aggressive type. YOU know who you are!

You, the ones that don't mind stepping right up and telling us what you think. It's not that you're trying to cause a fight, right? But you're certainly not going to back down from one!

You're going to tell us your opinion even if we don't want to know... because for you, there are things much worse than fighting... things like being weak... getting run over. Right?

So, you're not going to hide in the dugout, like I want to do? Nope, you're going to step up and swing at every pitch that comes at you.

Only that's not a very good way to bat either, is it? Maybe if you're lucky you'll drive a ball down the line. Most likely you'll strike out.

Either way, the one thing you can count on is that *in all that wild swinging of the bat... you'll drive people away from you.*

So, whether you're like me, and you'd prefer to go hide in your own personal dugout, or whether you have a tendency to go out swinging so much that it's not safe for people to get close to you... ***either way... you're liable to end up in the hell of being all alone.***

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In his book **The Great Divorce**, C.S. Lewis paints a picture of hell that is haunting.

**And it is haunting not because it's a picture of some fiery place with a pitchforked red devil running around. It's haunting because it bears so much resemblance to where many people live.**

Hell, he says, is like a vast, gray city.

A city that is inhabited only at its outer edges, with rows and rows of empty houses in the middle. They are empty because everyone who once lived in them has quarreled with their neighbors and moved. And quarreled with the new neighbors and moved again, further and further out, leaving empty streets *full* of empty houses behind them.

**That, Lewis says, is how hell got so large – empty at the center and inhabited only on the fringes—because everyone in it chose distance instead of confrontation as the solution to a fight.**

Which means then, that hell ***grows*** every time we tell ourselves that we're better off without one another than confronting one another.

You see, fighting is deeply spiritual business. How we fight, fundamentally shapes heaven and hell.

I think that's what Jesus was getting at when he said... "whatever we bind on earth, will be bound in heaven. And whatever we let loose on earth, will be loosened in heaven."

Remember, when Jesus is talking about earth and heaven... he's not talking about two different locations. It's not like he's saying, "whatever happens here in St. Louis will also be happening in Kansas City."

Most of the time we hear language of heaven and earth that way, don't we? In our imagination we think of earth as right here, and heaven as up there, far, far away. In our minds eye, heaven and earth are distant places, hardly related. And so, of course, Jesus' words here don't make a lot of sense to us, do they?

In order to understand what Jesus is saying, we have to keep in mind that *Jesus sees these two realms differently and is always bringing together heaven and earth for us.* In fact, his principal message is that the Kingdom of God, heaven itself, is at hand. It's here... in the midst of the physical world, not separate from it.

Heaven and earth aren't distant related realities, but overlapping, intertwined realities.

Heaven and Earth, time and eternity, spirit and matter... they are one – that's at the heart of Jesus' teachings and life itself.

So, how we fight... is deeply spiritual stuff. Whatever you bind and let loose on earth... is being bound and loosened in the intertwined reality of heaven...

If you let loose hell on someone...

and drive them further into isolation...

or if you walk away because it's easier to be alone than together...  
either way... ***you're expanding the boundaries of hell.***

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How we fight is deeply spiritual business, and Jesus knows most of us aren't all that good at it, so he coaches us through it.

First you have to start by working on your stance. Your batting stance always makes a difference when you're up, doesn't it?

You've got to start by working on your stance. Your posture has to begin by being oriented to the relationship itself, to the community itself.

You have to begin by remembering you're not fighting to prove you are right, or even just to air your grievances... That might happen along the way, but it can't be the goal.

The first step in any holy fight is to keep in mind that ***the relationship itself is what you're fighting for.*** The goal in a holy confrontation is to win back the relationship. That has to be your stance.

In fact, it's the only reason to take Jesus' advice at all. If the relationship itself is not your goal, then you might as well disregard what Jesus has to say.

Once it's clear that the *relationship* is what you're fighting for... it helps you keep yourself focused on ***reconciliation, not retribution.*** Those are two profoundly different things... We get them mixed up a lot in our society.

In fact, our whole judicial system is based on retribution, not reconciliation. ***But God calls us to a different way. God dreams for us a different way. And the gospel demands we follow a different way!***

Retribution tends to just increase the size of hell.

Reconciliation brings heaven on earth.

In any conflict worth entering, *reconciliation* has to be our primary goal... if we are going to call ourselves Christ followers. And reconciliation doesn't mean brushing your hurts under the carpet. ***Real reconciliation requires telling the truth as best as you can... but also being willing to really hear the other person's truth. Because remember, you are fighting for the relationship itself.***

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Once you have that cleared up in your heart and in your mind that that is your goal, then the only thing left is to pick up the phone and make a call, or write a letter, or send an email and ask your fellow teammate out for coffee. It's time to start a conversation.

This, of course, is where most of us get hung up. Something holds us back.

***What if they misunderstand?***

***What if it makes things worse?***

***Why should I have to be the one to reach out first? They should call me!***

There are all kinds of thoughts we might have... all of them trying to get us to delay, telling us we're not ready. Only Jesus doesn't tell us to wait until we're ready, does he? He just says to do it. Go. Reach out to your brother or sister.

And so that's what we've got to do.  
Reach out... in truth, trusting that your desire is reconciliation...  
and allow that desire to lead you.

Sure, things might not go as planned. But you've got to try. The only thing that is served by avoiding the conflict or shutting it down with all your wild swinging... is hell itself. So, don't let your nerves, or your anger, or your resentment keep you from starting. Reach out because heaven and earth depend on it.

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If it doesn't go well the first time, then try again. Batting takes practice, remember. Maybe bring a coach with you. Even the best players can't coach themselves. They need someone else there to fix their stance, and adjust their swing, and so will you.

**Bring someone else, Jesus says, to witness the whole thing. Who knows, maybe you're the one in the wrong. But if reconciliation is your goal, wouldn't you want to know? And if you're not wrong, then maybe someone else's voice will help.**

Either way, keep working at this batting stuff, Jesus says. Even if it involves the whole team. Just keep trying to win back the relationship...

**Until it's clear... they are interested in a real, honest relationship with you. Sometimes that doesn't happen, you know... and Jesus tells us as much. There comes a time in unhealthy relationships or unhealthy communities, when you have to let them go and start the hard journey of forgiveness and grace. You just have to treat them like a tax collector or gentile. They aren't part of your community, but you love them from afar.**

To follow Jesus' way, is to be honest about that, too.  
We work for the relationship,  
but if we have to let it go, we let it go.

It reminds me of these great poetic lines from Mary Oliver:

**To live in this world, you must be able to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it against your bones  
knowing your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.<sup>1</sup>**

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Being a person trying to love other people can be hard, can't it? But it is the only way out of hell because our life in Christ is a community affair.

Barbra Brown Taylor writes, "In a lot of ways, it is a real nuisance to belong to a community. It would be so much easier if we were just a bunch of individuals, loosely bound by similar beliefs but whose affairs remained an essentially private matter between us and God.

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Oliver, "In Blackwater Woods"

But according to Jesus, there is no such thing as privacy in the family of God. Our life together is the chief means God has chosen for being with us, and it is of ultimate importance to God.

Our life together is the place where we are

comforted, confronted,

tested, and redeemed by God through one another.

It is the place where we come to know God or to flee from God's presence,  
depending upon how we come to know or flee from one another."<sup>2</sup>

So, don't give up on the community even when you're hurt or frustrated with the Church. Don't give up. Yes, we will hurt one another from time to time. God knows love hurts.

There's a line from a band I listened to a lot in college that often comes back to me: "O God, it hurts so bad, to love anyone down here. But oh, that's right, you know so well, one thorny crown, three nails and a spear."

Being part of the Body of Christ, can hurt.

But when we bear with one another in love, telling one another truth...

when we work for reconciliation and not retribution,

**we will experience the profound power of resurrection,**

**and in the process, you will shake up the very foundation of hell.**

It is a holy and beautiful thing.

When you find reconciliation,

you will discover the Kingdom of God has come on earth,

as it is in heaven.

And that is too good of a thing to miss. Don't miss it.

Amen?

Silent Reflection

*Oh, God, it hurts so bad to love anybody down here*

*Oh, that's right, you know so well*

*One thorny crown, three nails, and a spear*

~ Waterdeep

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<sup>2</sup> Barbra Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, 89.