

Anybody Done You Wrong Lately?

Jesus has a few choice words to say about what you should do when other people cause bad things to happen to you. His way of handling these situations is sometimes called “the Matthew 18 approach,” because that’s where he tells his followers what to do.

Friends, relatives, neighbors, and even enemies can hurt us in lots of different ways. They may even be well intentioned and do something to help us that has the opposite effect. They may not even notice, going along their own way so fast they’re unaware of who they hurt going by. They may take something we have when they don’t think we value or deserve it. Or, for some reason of their own, they may really want to cause us trouble.

Responding rather than reacting

When we’re hurt by someone else, regardless of his or her reasons, we still need to deal with it. We need to repair the damage done to ourselves, and we need to deal with the damage done to our relationship with the perpetrator.

Jesus grew up among ordinary sinful human beings, and he had plenty of experience with people who do harm to others, especially to the vulnerable. His advice on how to handle these things when we’re the victim is very practical.

What kind of perpetrator is Jesus talking about? In the many translations of the Bible, Jesus says,

If another member of the church sins against you (Matthew 18:15 NRSV)

Now really. In the days Jesus was teaching there weren’t any churches to be a member of. The original word in Greek that Jesus uses is *ἀδελφός*, which literally means “brother.” When it’s used for both men and women, this word is usually translated as “brothers and sisters.” It can be used for any group based on their family, nationality, common interests, or common faith.

In the New Testament after the time of Jesus, “brothers” is used to refer to those in a close community relationship, usually followers of Jesus in a particular place. In our time, with so much more exposure to many people of different interests, it could apply to any group with something in common where members of the group know each other pretty well.

First try

The first step, not necessarily the most fun when we’ve been hurt, is to go directly to the other person involved. Jesus says,

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. (Matthew 18:15)

This conversation is meant to be friendly, not angry, vengeful, whining, or even self-righteous. Talk, listen, and explain, so that the other person can understand the impact of what they did on you.

If they sympathize, apologize, and even make amends if needed, wonderful! You’ve saved your friendship, short-circuited a potential feud, and prevented disruption in the community that you share.

Second try

If talking directly doesn't work, it's time to move to plan B. Jesus says,

But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' (Matthew 18:16)

This time bring some other folks into the conversation who can verify what you have to say.

Hopefully these witnesses can be objective and believable to the person who caused the problem. They may also be able to calm hard feelings, depersonalize the issues, and help find a resolution where all can agree.

Third try

If that conversation doesn't come to a resolution, then it's time to move to plan C. Jesus says,

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; ... (Matthew 18:17)

We know that there wasn't something called a "church" when Jesus was talking. The original word in Greek that Jesus uses is **ἐκκλησία**, which literally means "assembly."

For centuries before Jesus, it was common practice for Greeks to refer to any group of people with a well-defined membership as an assembly. After Jesus, "assembly" in the rest of the New Testament usually implies "an assembly of God's people."

Plan C brings the problem directly to the whole community. In our time, this most likely means the community that you share with the perpetrator. It could be a church, a bible study group, a fraternal organization, a club, or even a group that comes together for exercise, hobbies, or some common interest.

In this community you and the person who hurt you are likely to have supportive friends, and there are probably leaders who encourage solutions that keep the community together.

If no success

If all these approaches fail, then Jesus says,

... if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Matthew 18:17)

This last resort is often misinterpreted to say that this perpetrator should be shunned or driven out of the community. This is not what Jesus is saying.

In the time of Jesus, Jews needed to interact with non-Jews and tax collectors. People didn't have to like those who collected their taxes, but they did need to be polite and businesslike. A Jew might be hired to work on a farm owned by a non-Jew or hire a non-Jew to do the family laundry. You could be polite to a non-Jew or a tax collector, but you didn't invite them into your home or your private life.

You give these outsiders the same treatment you should give a stranger: courtesy and help in a crisis, but not the kind of trust that would put your life in their hands. These days, this would be the kind of treatment you give a person when you have no history, good or bad.

What we have that people in the first century did not is access to reasonably effective and fair law enforcement. Calling 911 is still our first action when someone is violent or breaking the law. Of course the law doesn't cover all of the ways we can be hurt, especially by those close to us.

This is when the Matthew 18 approach can help. A person doesn't need to be a follower of Jesus or the member of a church to use the steps Jesus suggests. Using his steps, we have our best chance to resolve a hurt without losing our relationships with those around us.