

Matthew 18:21-35

Introduction

Today we come to the last section of Matthew 18 – the chapter on kingdom *community*. You may remember that in the “Old Testament Bible” that Jesus and the disciples’ used, the Greek word for the *assembly* of *Israel* was “ekklesia.” And now in Matthew 16 and Matthew 18 Jesus takes this very same Greek word (“ekklesia”) and uses it for the new community and assembly of His own *disciples*. This is very significant! The Old Testament assembly of Israel is finally becoming what it had always been destined to become – the eschatological assembly of the Messiah – the church (*ekklesia*). And, of course, that’s what we are. That’s what this is. So we could say that Matthew 18 is the *blueprint* for the church. It is Jesus’ manifesto on what it means to be the kingdom community – the assembly of the Messiah. By the *grace* of God, may we truly be a Matthew 18 church.

We’ve seen that after warning the disciples about causing even the least member of the assembly to sin, Jesus tells His disciples what to do when the tables are turned and 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. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you... If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church [ekklesia/assembly]. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” But now this raises a question in Peter’s mind.

I. Matthew 18:21 — Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”

The first thing we need to see here is that forgiveness is not just about a subjective feeling or attitude. We tend to think of forgiveness mainly as a heart attitude – a *spirit* of forgiveness. So the opposite of forgiveness would be a spirit of bitterness, and anger, and resentment. By this definition of forgiveness, we should forgive our brother whether he asks to be forgiven or not – whether he repents or doesn’t repent – it doesn’t matter. This is very true. But there’s more to forgiveness than just this subjective heart attitude. On the one hand, there’s the matter of my inward heart and spirit (that’s subjective), but on the other hand, there’s the matter of my outward *relationship* with the brother who has sinned against me (that’s objective). When real *sin* has been committed against me (something that is truly *a breaking of GOD’S holy law*), then there is always at some level a *breaking of relationship*. *Sin* cannot simply be ignored! In fact, as we’ve just seen, *sin must not* be ignored! (Remember, we’re *not* talking about when our feelings have been hurt, or we’ve been offended. The answer to this problem is to assume the status of a little child, surrounded by important grownups.) So when we think of forgiveness objectively, we’re thinking of the restoration of a brother to full *fellowship*. We’re thinking of the complete restoration of *relationship* – the welcoming back of a brother with *open arms*. And the reality here is that until my brother is *repentant*, it’s impossible to grant him this kind of forgiveness. So Jesus says in verse 15: “If [your brother] listens to you, you have *gained* your brother.” The relationship has been restored; forgiveness has been given. *But* if your brother does not listen to you... well, that’s another story. So let’s take it to the extreme. When I regard a brother as a Gentile and a tax collector, have I forgiven him? In one sense the answer is “no.” I have *not*

forgiven him in the objective sense of a restored relationship – though I am *always* responsible to have a forgiving attitude and heart, and *never* to bear a grudge. So when we think of forgiveness objectively, there are some times when we not only *cannot*, but *must not* forgive! This should help us to make sense of verses like these:

- ✓ John 20:23 – If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; *if you withhold forgiveness from any*, it is withheld.
- ✓ 2 Corinthians 2:6-7, 10 — For such a one, *this punishment by the majority is enough*, so you should rather *turn to forgive and comfort him*, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow... *Anyone whom you forgive*, I also forgive.
- ✓ Luke 17:3-4 — If your brother sins, rebuke him, and *if* he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and [*if* he] turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.

So it’s this objective sense of forgiveness that Peter is thinking about. When he suggests that he should forgive his brother “as many as seven times,” he’s not asking permission to start bearing a grudge and harboring bitterness after the seventh time! Peter’s just trying to be practical and realistic. Let’s say that my brother commits the same sin against me over and over again, and over and over again he comes to me in repentance. Given this situation, how many times should I be willing to forego the second step of bringing one or two others along with me? How many times should I be willing to forego the third step of telling my brother’s sin to the assembly? How many times should I be willing to forego the fourth step of regarding my brother as a Gentile and a tax collector? Given this situation of repeated sin and repeated repentance, how many times should I be willing to accept a brother back into the fellowship of a *fully restored relationship*? In Peter’s mind, his question didn’t have anything to do with bitterness and bearing grudges. His question was about *righteousness*. It was about *justice*! How many times should a person be allowed to “get away” with sin? How many times should the same sin be allowed to go *unpunished*? In light of the seriousness of my brother’s repeated sin, how many times should I be willing to accept him back into the fellowship of a *fully restored relationship*? *Eventually, somewhere* along the line, doesn’t there come a point where *justice* must be done? After all, this assembly is the temple of God’s holy presence!

Now the Pharisees taught that it was appropriate to forgive a person three times, but after that, they said, mercy and grace must give way to justice. Personally, I didn’t have to think about it very long before concluding that three times is a *lot* to ask. Two times *seems* doable and realistic, but the third time, I feel like I’m just being a pushover. But Peter’s not so sure. Have you ever thought about *why* Peter might have felt the need to up the number to seven times? I wonder if it’s because after all of his time spent with Jesus, he’s come to know and understand something of Jesus’ heart. Peter has a feeling that “three times” is not going to measure up to Jesus’ standard of mercy, and compassion and grace. And so he more than doubles the standard of the Pharisees and actually, *unbelievably*, suggests “as many as *seven* times”! And at this point, I’m saying to Peter: “Careful now! Slow down! Not so fast!” Think about what you’re saying! Could you really forgive a person for the same offense *seven* times in a row (cf. Luke 17:4)? Wait a minute – what I meant to say was, “*Should* you really forgive a person for the same offense seven times in a row? But it’s too late, isn’t it? I’ve already betrayed what’s really in my heart. What I’m mostly concerned with are my own personal rights – *not* true *justice and*

righteousness. Jesus knows this about us. And I think Jesus knew this about Peter. But how easily and how thoroughly we deceive ourselves. Still, at the end of the day, there *must* be *some* limit to how many times we are *required* to forgive! How many times can a person cross the line and sin against me before it's only *right* and *just* that he be left on the hook? And yes, how many times do I have to be burned before *I* have the right to "protect" *myself* from more hurt and pain? Which one of *us* would have suggested *seven* times? Seriously. I think if we're *honest*, we'd all have to say at this point that Peter is a "better man" than we are.

II. Matthew 18:22 —Jesus said to [Peter], "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Seventy-seven times. Stunned silence. Can you imagine forgiving someone for the same offense 77 times in a row? No! It would be unbearable! It would be impossible! And for that matter, it wouldn't be *right*. But then far more overwhelming than this is the fact that seventy-seven is really just a figure of speech by which Jesus means that there is *no limit* to the number of times that we must forgive a brother (cf. Gen. 4:24). When a brother or sister repents, even if it is for the "umpteenth" time, we are to welcome him back with open arms – forgiveness is to be automatic, with no limits, no qualifications, and no exceptions. Period. But how can this be reasonable? How can this be possible? How can this be right? Jesus went on to tell a parable:

III. Matthew 18:23–24 — Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.

One talent of silver equaled about 6,000 denarii. One denarius was an acceptable day's pay for a laborer (cf. Mt 20:1-15). So a worker could hope to earn one talent of silver in 16 years. To earn 10,000 talents of silver would take the average worker well over 3000 lifetimes. The ESV Study Bible points out that 10,000 talents of silver might be equivalent to \$6 billion today. But we'd be missing Jesus' point if we said that a multi-billionaire could pay off this debt. The Greek word for "ten thousand" is actually "myria," from which we get the word "myriad," and it's the biggest number in the Greek language. The "talent" was the largest denomination of money in Jesus' time. So 10,000 talents is the largest amount of money that could possibly be expressed in the Greek language. In other words, this servant owed the king an "*impossible*" amount of money – far beyond any human being's ability to repay.

I owe God an unimaginable debt. We *all* do. All of us here owe to God a debt that is utterly impossible to repay. We like to be optimistic. We say, "where there's a will, there's a way." But there is no way. When we think of our debt, we think of a number we can comprehend. But Jesus' point is that we all owe God a debt that cannot even be calculated by human minds. When we really try to comprehend the magnitude of the debt we owe, we can only be plunged into total and complete despair. Matthew Henry writes: "Sinners are insolvent debtors; the scripture 'which concludeth all under sin,' is a statute of bankruptcy for us all." "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents."

IV. Matthew 18:24-26 — And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’

Notice that this servant doesn’t ask the king to forgive the debt. He asks for time to pay it all back – which the king knows is utterly impossible. Surely the servant *must* know this too, and yet in desperation he promises the impossible – the completely ludicrous and absurd! The reality is that he has zero bargaining power with the king – *none, at all*. It’s truly hopeless. But then something totally unexpected happens.

V. Matthew 18:27 — And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

How do you respond to something like this? What do you say? To completely forgive such a debt, to simply write it off, is something the world has never before seen or heard of. In a parable that is full of things that are astonishing and shocking, this is *by far* the *most* astonishing and shocking of all. The *forgiveness* of the debt is even more incomprehensible than the debt itself because this forgiveness can only arise from a *pity* and *compassion* that is also beyond our human abilities to calculate or comprehend. When we think of God’s forgiveness toward us, we think in terms that we can comprehend. But Jesus’ point is that when God forgives a sinner, it requires a God of *unimaginable* compassion and mercy and grace. Only such a God could forgive a debt as big as ours. When we really try to comprehend the magnitude of God’s grace, we can only end up plunging ourselves into an ocean that has no shores. As the hymn writer puts it: “Could we with ink the ocean fill and were the skies of parchment made, were every stalk on earth a quill and every man a scribe by trade, to write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry; nor could the scroll contain the whole, tho’ stretched from sky to sky.” (Frederick Lehman)

VI. Matthew 18:28-30 — But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.

A hundred denarii is about three months wages. To most of us, that would seem like a *lot* of money. But obviously compared to the incalculable amount of a myriad talents, it’s *nothing*. And yet the same servant who was forgiven the myriad talents *by His king*... this same servant *seized* his *fellow* servant and began to *choke* him demanding immediate repayment of his debt. And so, of course, we listen in complete sympathy to the pleas of this second servant, who fell down on his knees and began begging: “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” Surely the first servant can hear his *own* pleas in the pleas of his fellow servant! Surely he *will* remember that only yesterday he himself was crying out with the same words and then forgiven a debt infinitely larger than 300 denarii. And now I can feel myself just *daring* him to refuse. We all

agree, don't we? There is only **one possible right** thing for the first servant to do. It's what any even remotely *descent* person *would* do.

But "he refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt." This servant is truly the scum of the earth! How can he so quickly and so easily forget and discount the debt that he has just been forgiven? He's an ungrateful wretch! This man is despicable! Abhorrent! Loathsome! Utterly detestable! He *deserves* to be severely punished.

VII. Matthew 18:31–35 — When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.

Can any of us argue with the King's decision? Would any of us *want* to argue? This was the only possible *just* and *right* thing for the king to do. And so we all nod in satisfaction and even *relief* at this good and proper ending to the story. We do, don't we? And in doing so, we *condemn ourselves*. Jesus concludes:

VIII. Matthew 18:35 — So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

Our anger and loathing for the man in Jesus' parable exposes the senselessness and the irrationality and also the terrifying consequences of our own refusal to forgive, say, any more than *seven* times – or ten, or twenty, or thirty, or fifty, or seventy! As one person puts it, according to Jesus "our guilt before God is *unendingly greater* than any other person's guilt can be before us" (Schniewind, quoted in Bruner). And this is true *all the time* – no matter what the sin and no matter how many times that sin has been committed against us. How dense and how uncomprehending we are when it comes to our own sin! Our refusal to forgive after the seventh time is *always* the *same* as the despicable, abhorrent, loathsome, and utterly detestable refusal of the first servant to forgive his fellow servant. The truth is that I can't *possibly* hold the tiniest little shred of a grudge against a brother if my mind has been truly boggled by the incalculable magnitude of a mercy and compassion that would *forgive* a debt like mine. My refusal to forgive even for the seventy-*eighth* time can only be an ungrateful spurning of the measureless *grace* of God.

Now the point of this parable is not to show that once God has given His forgiveness, He sometimes takes it away ("in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt"). A parable is not meant to be applied so woodenly (in this case, we would also have to say that God forgives people who really aren't repentant). The point is simply that every one of us *must* forgive our brother if we are to have any assurance and confidence that our own sins are forgiven. Because if we hold a grudge against a brother, then we show that we ourselves have an *unrepentant* heart. The surest and most compelling evidence of a truly *repentant* spirit is always a *forgiving* spirit. How could it not be? So in the words of Jesus: We must, every one of us,

forgive our brother from our heart. “The forgiveness which God expects of his people is not a reluctant or merely verbal concession which leaves the underlying problem unresolved, but a genuine, warm forgiveness ‘from the heart’ **so that the broken relationship is fully restored.**” (France) But there are many *professing* “Christians” today who are actually in danger of eternal judgment because they persistently and willfully *refuse* to forgive. Because they *insist* on harboring a grudge. Now if this describes any one of us here, there is no need to despair. We don’t need to muster up our strength to forgive before God will forgive us. We just need to humble ourselves before God with a true spirit of repentance and seek the mercy of God for the forgiveness of our *own infinite debt*. When we have done *this* – when we are living *daily* in that *experience* of the boundless and measureless mercies of God – *then* we will forgive (seventy-seven times and more).

Conclusion

O brothers and sisters! *Here*, for the final time, is the secret to living together in true community – as the true assembly of the Messiah. May the attitude of the tax collector (or publican) always be our own, who “standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” (Luke 18:13) If my brother sins, I must rebuke him, and if he repents, ***I must forgive him***, and if he sins against me *seven times in the day*, and turns to me *seven times*, saying, ‘I repent,’ ***I must forgive him*** (cf. Luke 17:3-4). I must *delight* to forgive him and welcome him back with open arms – ***every single time***. *I know* that my own guilt before God is unendingly greater than any other person’s guilt could ever possibly be before me. May God truly cause us to be a Matthew 18 church.