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### **Matthew 18:21-35**

#### **Forgiven and Forgiving**

Over the past couple of Sundays, we've looked at the difficult topic of church discipline. As we've been going through the gospel of Matthew, we made our way into chapter 18, which is all about dealing with the sins of professing believers within the Christian community. And as all of us know, dealing with sin in any relationship, but *especially within the church*, can get very messy and very painful very quickly. And so, Jesus gave us instructions about how to deal with it. So a couple of weeks ago, as we looked at vv.15-20, we went over Jesus's instructions for "church discipline" - for how he commands us, as his followers, to deal with sins among one another, between fellow Christian church members. Last week, we looked at a very similar passage, in 1 Cor. 5:1-13, where Paul applied these same principles to a real-life situation going on in the church. As we put these passages together, we see that we're commanded to deal with sins as they come up within the church. Jesus says that if our "brother" - our fellow Christian church member - sins against us, then we are to lovingly but firmly confront them, showing them the error of their sin and calling them to repentance. We're to do so *for their good*. And we're to do so in the least humiliating way possible - going about it privately at first. This is just supposed to be a part of our church culture - where we are simply used to talking about our own sins and gently confronting each other's sins in a constructive way. When we think of church discipline, we probably think first of the more dramatic cases, where someone is called before the church, or when someone is removed from membership. But the vast majority of church discipline is meant to take place quietly, subtly, even peacefully. The normal culture of a healthy church is supposed to be an environment where we can regularly acknowledge and confront sin, gently rebuke our brother when he is clearly in sin, confess and repent from our sins to one another without fear, and *graciously forgive one another*, being reconciled as brothers and sisters. This is the basic, healthy rhythm Jesus is setting into the foundation of church life: when sin happens, lovingly confront, call for repentance, and *graciously forgive*.

Jesus gave guidelines for how to address it if the person does not repent - getting others in the church involved, eventually taking it to the whole church, and removing the unrepentant person from membership if there is still a refusal to repent. In 1 Cor. 5, we saw the same thing, so

that when clear, intentional sin becomes exposed among a member of the church, it has to be dealt with; indeed, the more public the sin, the more publicly it has to be dealt with. But again, even here, even in scandalous cases, ***the goal is always for the sinner to repent so that they can be forgiven and we can be reconciled.*** Church discipline is never meant to be cruel, harsh, judgmental, or unmerciful; it is never to be an act of vengeance or spite. Our heart and aim must *always* be driven by *gracious forgiveness*.

And yet, this last part can sometimes be the hardest part of the whole church discipline process. When we are sinned against, when we are confronted with the ugly sins of another, when we feel betrayed by the utter depravity of our fellow brother and sister whom we know and love - well, sometimes, the very *last thing* we want to do is show them forgiveness, isn't it? Think of a time in your life when you were sinned against - particularly by someone you knew, loved, and trusted. Maybe it was a friend, a family member, a boss, or a church member. It's probably not hard for many of us to think of such painful memories. When we think of our own sin, our hearts quickly cry out for mercy and grace! But when we think of the sins of someone *else* committed against *us* - well, our hearts aren't as quick to cry out for mercy, are they? We might more naturally cry out for justice to be done! Or worse: even when we have a just cause, we can respond to sin *with our own sin*; our hearts can quickly become bitter and vindictive. Unfortunately, our sinful hearts tend to cry out for *vengeance* much more quickly than *forgiveness*. We often shy away from church discipline because we don't like the idea of confrontation regarding someone's sin, especially not publicly. But there's also *another reason* we don't like to deal with each other's sins: often times, what's really going on is *we don't actually want to genuinely forgive them and be reconciled*. It's hard work to forgive and seek reconciliation. If we specifically name the sin, then we have to *forgive that specific sin*; if our brother or sister repents, we have to genuinely forgive them and not hold it against them, never to bring it up again! It's much easier - or at least, we think it is - to pretend like everything is ok on the outside while we harbor bitterness and hold a grudge on the inside.

It is not accident, then, that *Matt. 18:15-20*, the passage on church discipline, is directly followed by *Matthew 18:21-35* - a passage all about the absolute necessity of our willingness to extend forgiveness and graciously work towards restoration. In this passage, Jesus exhorts us to *always be willing to forgive, no matter what and no matter how many times it takes*. He even *warns us* of the dire state of our souls if we refuse to forgive. And he reminds us that our call to

*forgive others* is rooted in the *extravagant forgiveness* we have received from God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. He reminds us that if we are a *forgiven people*, then we must be *forgiving people*.

So first, let's look at the exhortation of the passage:

**I. We Must Always Forgive our Repentant Brother or Sister (Matt. 18:21-22)**

As we've worked through these church discipline passages, perhaps you've wondered, "OK, surely there's a limit to how many times I'm expected to forgive someone who sins against me, right? Sure, if someone isn't a Christian, then it's one thing to forgive them - after all, I can't expect them to behave like a Christian anyway. But if my fellow *church member* sins against me? If a deacon or pastor sins against me - am I really supposed to forgive even then? And what if my brother repents - only to sin and repent again, and again, and again - doesn't there come a time when enough is enough?"

Our passage begins with Peter asking Jesus a very similar question in verse 21: "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" A commonly held Rabbinic teaching at about that time put a limit on forgiveness at *three times* - if someone wrongs you and seeks forgiveness, forgive him once, twice, even three times, but after that, no more; enough is enough. So when Peter suggests *seven times* here, he probably sees himself as being very generous - after all, seven is over twice as many times as was commonly taught! He probably expected Jesus to agree, maybe even applaud his generous heart, or even lower the standard to less than 7 times.<sup>1</sup>

But instead, Jesus does the exact opposite. "Jesus said to him, "I do not say seven times, but seventy-seven times" (v.22). Some translations even say "seventy times seven times." Whichever translation is right, the point remains the same: Peter's "seven times" still assumes there is a limit; it's not nearly generous, gracious, or forgiving enough; it still misses the point. If we still holding a sin against someone after they have confessed and repented from it, then we have *not truly forgiven them*. If we are still counting offenses, just barely giving them another chance before they blow it and our patience runs out, then *we have not truly forgiven that person in our heart*. And if you try and keep count all the way up to 77 times - let alone 70 times 7 times! - then, clearly, you've missed the point of forgiveness altogether!

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<sup>1</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT, p. 700.

So when Jesus says “77 times,” he’s not putting a literal limit on forgiveness. In fact, I think the opposite is true - I think he’s saying that we should forgive our brother as often as we’re given opportunity to. We should do so without limit!

But there’s another danger here that we want to avoid as well: another *wrong interpretation* of this verse we be some kind of unqualified forgiveness and mercy to such a degree that it completely undoes verses 15-20 - as is Jesus is calling for us to ignore someone’s sins and show them “mercy” by never addressing any sin at all. Obviously, as we’ve seen, that cannot be what Jesus means. In the parallel passage Luke 17:3-4, forgiveness is offered explicitly *after* the sinner *repents* in response to a rebuke. We’re still called to address, confront, and deal with sins and consequences of sins at times.

So then, how do we put these two demands together? I think we can do so like this: there is an *inward reality* of forgiveness, that starts in our own hearts, and an *outward reality* that strives for *reconciliation* with those we are forgiving. When someone sins against or wrongs us, the Christian response is for us to “forgive them” in our hearts, regardless of whether or not they repent. We see such an unqualified heart of forgiveness in **Mark 11:25** - “And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” We “forgive” in this sense by giving that hurt over to the Lord, know longer holding a grudge or spirit of bitterness and vengeance towards that other person. But this doesn’t mean we “forget” what has happened or ignore the sins and offenses of others. You see, the second aspect of “forgiving” someone is *outward* - we cannot *extend forgiveness* to someone and be reconciled to them *unless they admit what they did wrong and repent from it*. Because we forgive them in our hearts first, we are always willing and desiring to extend such forgiveness and grace, hoping they repent! But until they do, we cannot have genuine reconciliation in our relationship with them - that unaddressed sin forms a barrier between us and has to be dealt with (just as the process of church discipline shows).

But either way, our hearts must be filled with *forgiveness, mercy, and grace* towards others, to an endless degree. Why? *Because this is the very forgiveness and grace we have received from God in Christ Jesus.*

## **II. Remember God’s Incredible, Totally Undeserved Forgiveness for us in Christ (18:23-27)**

Jesus fleshes out his point by telling a parable - the “parable of the unforgiving servant.”

He begins in v.23-4, saying, “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.” In other words, this rich and powerful king had a servant who owed him a great deal of money: “ten thousand talents.” One commentator I read said this would be over a billion dollars in today’s currency.<sup>2</sup> Another commentator pointed out that “Ten thousand” was the highest numerical value with a word for it in Greek; a “talent” was the highest denomination of money; in other words, he’s saying, “the largest sum of money imaginable;” for us, this would be like saying, “he owed billions” or “trillions of dollars in debt.”<sup>3</sup> We would be hard pressed to find an individual who could hope to pay off a debt this large! In other words: he sum of debt here is absolutely tremendous - it is impossible for a servant to pay off! This is an amount of debt that the servant *could never possibly imagine to work off or pay off in his entire life!*

And so, since he cannot pay, the king is going to have him and his family sold as punishment and to try and regain what money he can. But the servant begs for mercy in v.26: “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” Again, the amount of debt he has would be *absolutely impossible* to pay back in his lifetime.

This would be like an employee of a manufacturing plant owing the CEO of the company 1 trillion dollars. The man works on an assembly-line, putting in 40 hours a week. He makes decent pay, he provides for his family, he’s solidly middle class - but he would be absolutely delusional if he thought he could save up enough money from that job to pay off a debt of billions of dollars! It doesn’t matter how much overtime he gets, or even if he picks up a second or third job - it’s just not gonna happen. The debt he owes is insurmountable - it’s out of his league. He’s got no hope of paying it off.

This underscores how unrealistic and baseless his plea to be given more time to pay off his debt is - it would be an incredible amount of mercy and grace for the master to even be patient and grant more time, for they all know that, no matter how much time is given, the servant will never be able to pay it off!

But the master shows *even more grace than that - he has mercy to an incredible, unimaginable degree:* v.27, “And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and

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<sup>2</sup> D.A. Carson, Matthew 13-28, EBC, p. 406.

<sup>3</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT, p. 704.

forgave him the debt.” He forgave all the debt! Not because he expected a return, but simply out of *pity* - out of compassion, mercy, undeserved *grace*. This is meant to be a picture of *God’s incredibly gracious, completely unmerited, mercifully compassionate forgiveness towards His people in Christ Jesus*.

We are this servant - we have all sinned, and we could *never* repay the debt of our sin against the Holy, Righteous, perfectly Good, and Just God. Everyone has sinned and rebelled against GOD. We all owe a debt to GOD that we can never afford to pay. And one day, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. AND the penalty - the wages, the payment due, the punishment deserved - for our debt of sins is the very *eternal wrath of GOD and divine judgment in Hell!* THERE is no hope whatsoever of ever repaying our debts, cleaning our ledger, redeeming ourselves, outweighing our “bad” with our “good” - it is absolutely impossible for us to save ourselves, no matter what we do or how hard we try.

If there’s nothing we can do to pay off our debts, then what hope is offered to us? He doesn’t give us a chance to “work it off” or “try better” - the Christian message is not that GOD offers us a “second chance.” That would be very merciful and generous of GOD to do so - *but that still wouldn’t work*. THAT would be just like the servant here, begging for more time to work off his debt. It still wouldn’t make any difference - no matter how hard he tries, no matter how much time he’s given, he will *never work enough overtime*, never pick up enough shifts, never *scrimp and save enough* to pay back the billions and trillions he owes!

But there is incredibly good news - God is far more merciful, gracious, compassionate, and kind than you could ever imagine! Even though we all owe an impossible debt because of our sins, God - like this merciful king in the story - has made it possible so that we can be completely *forgiven* of all of our debts of sin! How could this be? *Because it depends wholly upon God’s endless compassion and grace!*

THIS is the good news of the CHRISTIAN message -the gospel. Jesus Christ came and lived the perfect life we never could, died on the cross bearing the penalty of sins in our place, and rose again - and he did this to *pay the debt of our sin that we owe to God!* SUCH complete forgiveness is made possible by the life, work, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ! And it is freely given to *anyone* who believes this gospel message, turns from sin and to Christ, and trusts in His grace by faith!

If you're trusting in Christ this morning, you have received just as much extravagant grace and forgiveness as this servant has! It includes *every single on of your sins, past present, and future!* This absolutely incredible grace is ours!

And it is necessarily *life-changing*. Which means it comes with a warning and an exhortation for all of us. Let's look at the warning first:

### **III. If We Can't Forgive, Then We Might Not Actually Be Forgiven (18:28-35)**

This beautiful scene of grace is followed by a sickening scene of cruel, vindictive hypocrisy. In verses 28-30, we read, "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 his debt." A "denarius" was about a day's wage; so 100 "danarii" was not an insignificant amount of money - perhaps 3 or 4 months worth of income, maybe even more! And yet, it was *absolutely nothing* compared to the debt he had just been forgiven by the master! The *servant* was forgiven a *much greater debt* by his *master*; here, he *violently attacks a fellow servant* - someone just like him - who *owes him less* and *begs for mercy* just like he did; yet instead of showing mercy, like he was shown, he shows a cruel, hypocritical heart of vengeance and throws the other man in jail.

Clearly, this is meant to be relatable to us, yet in a negative way: just as we identify with the servant when he is given much, so we are *warned* that we might not identify with him here. We will be often tempted to *minimize* the amount of grace we have been shown and *dramatically over-emphasize* the wrongs of others and the "justice" that we think we are owed. We will often be tempted to demand blood, to harbor bitterness and a thirst for payback in our hearts. We will even be tempted to treat our fellow servants - *our fellow Christians, fellow church members*, this way. Perhaps you've witnessed this among Christians, maybe even in the church, seeing people refuse to talk to each other, or hold a grudge for years. Perhaps you yourself have finally had enough with someone's sins and mistakes, and you're tempted to burn the bridge between you now; to finally be done and give up on them because of what they have done. Maybe you feel so hurt and betrayed by someone in the past - maybe a past friend, a family member, a church

member, maybe even an old church leader or pastor - that you still harbor bitterness in your heart against them. Maybe you're still tempted to bring it up and get angry about it without seeking reconciliation with that person. Maybe you haven't truly let go of that hurt and given it over to the Lord.

While we're all tempted in this way at times, we need to pay close attention to Jesus's warning here: if we *refuse to forgive* someone, then it may very well show that we *have not actually been forgiven by God*. This is shown in verses 31-35. The wicked servant shows that he *completely disregards* the mercy he has been shown by the master! His wicked heart is revealed. And so, in verses 31-34, the king punishes him severely; he says, "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?" It's as if he's saying here, "So you want what you deserve, do you? You want to demand what you deserve from your fellow servant? Then you will get what you deserve from me." And he throws him to the "jailers" - which is actually best translated "torturers," which I think is meant to be a picture of the eternal judgment and wrath of God against sinners in Hell, which we all deserve for our sin.

Jesus brings the conclusion home with his application in v.35: "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." This is exactly what we saw in the Lord's prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, isn't it? IN Matt. 6:12, we're told to pray, "and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Then in vv.14-15 he says, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Now, Jesus is not saying that we *earn* our salvation by forgiving others; nor is he saying that we *lose* our salvation by refusing to forgive. Instead, what he's saying is this: if our hearts are so hardened that we *refuse to forgive others* then it shows that our hearts *have not been changed by the same such grace!* If we cannot forgive others, it shows a heart that has not been forgiven; if we are incapable of forgiveness, grace, and mercy, it may very well be because *we have not received the mercy, grace, and forgiveness of God towards us in Christ by faith!*

And this is because, when we are forgiven much and shown such grace, it *necessarily changes our hearts*. This leads us to our last point...

#### **IV. If we have been *Forgiven*, then we must be *Forgiving* (18:21-22, 32-33)**



When the master rebukes the wicked servant, he tells him the way he should have acted in v.33: “And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” If we have been forgiven by the grace of GOD in Christ Jesus, for all of our sins, then how can we not *graciously forgive others*? Precisely because he had been *forgiven much* he was expected to *forgive others much*.

And so it is with us. This passage began with Jesus exhorting us to have hearts of forgiveness - *always willing to forgive others; always willing to show endless mercy and be reconciled to our fellow Christians when they repent!* And this parable had just told us why: ***because this is exactly what our gracious Heavenly Father has done for us!*** And if we ask, “But how can I forgive someone who has hurt me so badly? How can I forgive and be reconciled with someone who keeps hurting me and sinning against me over and over again? Sure they keep repenting and asking for forgiveness - but how can I possibly keep forgiving them?” The answer for us is exactly the answer Jesus gives us here: ***look to the cross***. We can keep forgiving others by constantly remembering the extravagant grace shown to us in the gospel, every single day! We have to fix our eyes firmly on the grace of Jesus Christ: remembering that he truly has taken away the entire debt of our sin, if we’re trusting in him! And he’s done so *purely because of his grace and compassion!*

If we truly believe such radical grace, then it will transform our hearts. If we experience such endless forgiveness and grace, then we are freed, transformed, and compelled to extend the same forgiveness and grace of Christ that we have received and experienced to others! So let us remember how much we have been forgiven and be *quick and eager* to forgive others as well!

Because at the end of the day, what everyone needs is not to be forgiven by *us*, but by God. So if you are not a believer this morning, I want to remind you that right now you are under an enormous debt of your own sin - and you can never repay it; you can never work it off by being good enough. And the wages of your sin, just like mine, is *death* - eternal death and judgment in Hell. But there is good news! Jesus Christ is full of such grace! Beg the Lord for mercy in the name of Christ, believing that he lived, died, and rose again on the third day in your place, and you will be saved by grace through faith in Him!

If you have any questions about this gospel - about how to become a Christian, or about baptism and church membership, I would love to speak with you. YOU can come now and wait on the front row, or find me after the service. Let us pray.

