

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?"²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.

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

²⁵ 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. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ 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.'²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ 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. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Introduction

On first reading, it appears that church discipline (Mat 18.15-20) stands in contradiction to the forgiving spirit that Jesus encourages all church members to display (18.21-35). If you have a forgiving heart, you might wonder if you would ever begin the process of church discipline at step one. To forgive means to drop the issue and not bring it up against the one who sinned. Whereas, in step one, you "tell him his fault." Moreover, is it not the case that if you forgive, then, you do not punish? At the least, if discipline leads to excommunication, the church punishes the obstinate person who refuses to listen to repeated calls to repentance. These things suggest some kind of limitation on the duty of forgiveness, but the words of Jesus in 18.21-35 seem to indicate that any kind of limitation is wrong.

Perhaps, the best way to avoid contradiction here in Matthew 18 is to simply face the obvious fact that the forgiving spirit is the context of each step of discipline. Matthew puts Peter's question about forgiveness (18.21) in direct connection with the substance of helping one another in the royal family avoid sin by not causing them to sin (18.6) and by helping them make their way through the steps of church self-discipline (18.15-17). These things go hand in hand: talking to someone about their sin while maintaining a heart of forgiveness. Thus, I want to speak about this kind of heart today, the forgiving spirit noting that it is the context for church discipline because it is fundamental in the Christian life as a whole. I have two points: 1) Jesus affirms the duty of forgiveness, and 2) Jesus grounds the duty of forgiveness.

1A. Jesus affirms the duty of forgiveness (v. 21-22)

1B. Peter's question occasions this affirmation

Let us back up and get some perspective on his question. The question implies something on the order of step one of the discipline process where the brother sins, someone grants forgiveness, and there is a "gaining of the brother." The similar flow of thought in Luke 17 specifically mentions sin, rebuke, repentance, and forgiveness: **Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him.**"⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" (vs. 3-5). Perhaps, Peter missed the point that the seven times occur within a day (v. 4, **if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times**). Clearly, Peter is thinking in terms of specific limits: **Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?**

Jesus gave the disciples some weighty teaching about forgiveness (cf. Mat 5.23-25, 44; 6.14). In the Disciples' Prayer, the fifth petition stresses asking for forgiveness according to the measure that we grant it: **forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors... For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses** (Mat 6.12, 14). We must attach the matter of forgiveness of the fifth petition with the overcoming of temptation and deliverance from evil in the sixth petition.

Having a forgiving spirit is critical in overcoming evil within the Christian family, the church made up of sinner-disciples. It is a dimension of one-anothering love. Thus, forgiveness emerges within the process of discipline. The first step is one of the ways that we both apply and cultivate a forgiving spirit. It shows that Jesus expects that we will do the majority of our church discipline work within the framework of step one (daily forgiving repeatedly!).

Finally, on the question, Peter must be asking representatively again, in the presence of others for whom he speaks or, at the least, they overhear the conversation with Christ. He speaks in personal terms (cf. “I,” “my,” and “me” in verse 21), but the way the Lord broadens the scope to “every one of you” indicates that Jesus is giving another guideline for the coming church. Clearly, the teaching of this text is for every one of you here today.

2B. Jesus’ affirmation explains the duty

Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. Jesus sets no limits. God’s command cannot be restricted to a prescribed number. Forgiveness is not merely an action or a series of actions. It is an attitude, a disposition, and thus it is not merely something quantitative. We should describe it qualitatively as a forgiving spirit. Thus, true forgiveness is “from the heart” (v. 35). Verse 22 teaches that the language of a forgiving spirit is quite appropriate. Forgiving is qualitative not quantitative; you cannot put a limit on an attitude; you cannot put limitations on a matter of the heart. It is not a one shot deal; forgiveness unfolds life-long.

2A. Jesus grounds the duty of forgiveness (vs. 23-35)

The word “therefore” (v. 23) gives both a conclusion from verse 22 and a basis for some expansion on the duty of verse 22. The conclusion that flows from verse 22 is to this effect: because forgiveness is qualitative and thus an attitude, which has no limits, then, it follows that the kingdom of heaven is comparable to a king settling accounts with his servants. Then, by means of the parable, Jesus grounds the duty of forgiveness, and that is the main point.

Accordingly, a) the royal family (18.1-5) has the primary duty of forgiveness, the duty to exhibit a forgiving spirit. Those of childlike humble faith in Christ have this duty now b) against the Day of Judgment when the kingdom comes in its fullness, in full glory. To appreciate these things and then to apply them to our lives, we need to summarize the story and ponder its lesson.

1B. A summary of the story

We will do well to think through the story and absorb its details and impact.

A king comes to settle accounts with his servants (v. 23).

The settlement begins with a man who owes an extremely large amount of money (v. 24, he owes millions of dollars). He is unable to pay this enormous debt, so the king “ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt” (v. 25). This punishment leads the man to fall on his knees and beg for patience saying if you will give me some time “I will repay the debt” (v. 26).

What does the king do in response? The king “took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go” (v. 27). This forgiveness is pure grace and kindness as well as pity. He gives more than time so the servant can whittle away at paying an impossibly large debt. He forgives the debt, writes the entire sum off from his ledger, and instead of prison, he gives the man freedom.

What then does this servant do with his newfound freedom? Surprisingly, he goes to a person that owes him a *small* amount of money (just a few dollars) and treats him with a forgetful meanness. He *grabs* him by the throat “to choke him,” and he *demand*s payment saying, **Pay what you owe** (v. 28). In desperation, this lower-ranking servant responded in the same way as the higher-ranking servant: falling to his knees, he too begged for patience and promised repayment (v. 29). However, shockingly, in marked contrast to the benefits he received from the king, this higher-ranking servant refused to give time, freedom, and pity. Thus, he threw the man in prison until he could pay the debt (v. 30). Apparently, the system in play is one in which

imprisonment meant forced labor that would guarantee payment. The man could not leave town, he had to work by force (this was a forced work force), and his earnings went to pay his debt.

The action of this higher-ranking servant is not only surprising and shocking, but it is also distressing. Accordingly, the hard, merciless, cruel, and forgetful conduct distressed other servants who told the king all that happened.

This information elicits the outrage of the king. He summons this mean servant into his presence. Calling him a *wicked* servant (v. 32), he reminds him of the canceled debt and sharply rebukes him with these words; **I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.** ³³ **And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?** (v. 33). Knowing that the wicked servant can give no reasonable or adequate justification for his actions, the king turns the higher-ranking servant over to the jailers for severe punishment. He is to remain in prison until he pays the debt, which is so large that he can never come up with all that he owes, so his imprisonment is permanent. Additionally, the man is “to be tortured” the whole time he is in jail. There is clearly allusion here to eternal punishment.

2B. The lesson of the story

Jesus draws a very brief but pointed lesson based on the parable when He says, **So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart** (v. 35). This is definitely a warning that serves to promote the forgiving spirit within the royal family of God. Unquestionably, it grounds the duty of forgiveness.

How can we explain this verse without falling into a pitfall to the left or to the right? On the left is the pitfall that a brother in the family of God can lose his standing in the kingdom of God. The master in the parable cancels the debt, but then reimposes it! To personalize as the text personalizes: this pitfall suggests that you can lose your salvation and end up in eternal punishment, **if you do not forgive your brother from your heart**. This is not a comforting thought though it might serve as a motivation to forgive, but the motivating effect loses its power under a discouraging cloud of uncertainty. On the right is the idea that there really is no warning here because we know that believers cannot lose their salvation. On this side of the equation, there is no motivating effect (if any is there at all, it is practically nil).

What we need to do is preserve both the strength of the warning and the security of God’s children. Both are true and we should not play one off against the other. The way we do justice to both is twofold.

1) First, we must stress the fact that it is impossible for a true child of God to have a heart that is hardened, crystallized, and frozen with determination against forgiveness. It is impossible by definition because the child of God has a humble childlike faith in Christ (18.3). This humble heart receives little children who believe; sinful children in the family welcome other sinful children in the family *in the name of Christ*. They do so to what end? It is to help them avoid sin, to promote their every good (18.5-6). That is the opposite of an unforgiving heart. Childlike sinners in the kingdom receive other childlike sinners. Therefore, it is impossible for a true child of God to have a heart that is frozen in unforgiveness.

2) Second, we get the strength of the warning from the structure of the “if...then” language. The logic of this language is such that the “if” part can be false and the sentence remains true. Here is an example: if I plant the tulip bulbs in the fall (correctly, etc), then they will be ready to sprout in the spring. That sentence is true even if I never plant the tulip bulbs. Likewise, the claim “if you do not forgive from your heart, then you will experience eternal loss” is true even if it is impossible for a believer to have an unforgiving heart, a heart frozen in unforgiveness. The power of the “if...then” warning serves to promote a spirit of forgiveness.

Implications and applications

1) The warning is firm

The point is firm, if you do not forgive others in the family, you will perish forever. This is one of the ways that Jesus grounds the duty to forgive. It is a warning that reveals the inseparable bond that exists between an unforgiving spirit and eternal judgment. The warning is a means that God uses to stir up a spirit of forgiveness in the hearts of His people. It shows you what the lack of forgiveness, what your slips in this regard, merit for you. They merit eternal punishment. As this reality sinks deep into your hearts, it stirs up the kind of fear, godly fear, that will not let you rest until you do battle in your soul against malice and revenge, until your heart overflows with love for the brother or sister that sinned against you and hurt you painfully.

2) Distress is real

Another ground that motivates forgiveness is the distress that you feel when you consider the hardness of your heart toward a fellow believer in light of the kindness of God toward you. So and so, you name the person, sinned against you and hurt you in some intense way, but his or her offense against you is small, very small, in light of your infinite guilt before God. Therefore, God's loving kindness in forgiving you far exceeds the kindness He requires of you in forgiving others. When you see the mercy that you received, you can only experience distress at your slowness to show mercy to those whose sins against you are tiny in comparison with your sins against God. Absorbing this teaching of Christ into your heart will make you think like the other servants in the parable, and the distress will be toward yourself. Then you will personalize the master's words to the wicked servant and say, "He canceled all that debt of mine because I pleaded with Him. Shouldn't I show mercy on my fellow servants, my bother, and my sister, just as my king showed mercy to me?"

3) Calcification is impossible

As true family members in the family of the great king you cannot live with hearts calcified in an unwillingness to forgive Christ's little ones. This is the case because true family members are Christ's little ones themselves, which means that you have humble, submissive, childlike faith in Christ. That heartfelt submission to Christ is contrary to hearts calcified in an unwillingness to forgive the little ones who trust the Lord. As a believer, you love Christ much because you know you have been forgiven much. Those who cannot forgive others in the family have hearts of stone and not hearts of flesh. Without a submissive, humble, and forgiving spirit a person will never enter into the kingdom of God (Mat 18.3). This spirit is the mark of one who acknowledges his spiritual poverty and who is a humble, merciful, and repentant peacemaker (per the Beatitudes, Mat 5.1-11). Granted, you may not forgive others easily or perfectly, but you have a taste of heavenly forgiveness that you can never forget, and this grace moves you to strive to forgive others, especially fellow brothers and sisters in the Christian family.

4) Progress is a blessing

Therefore, you can only make forward progress in learning how to forgive more easily and more fully by the blessing of God. One blessing is the firm warning of Jesus that reveals the inseparable bond that exists between an unforgiving spirit and eternal judgment. Another blessing is the astounding reality that you and I can say and sing: "my sin, not in part, but the whole is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul." The teachings of this question and answer session with Peter are means that help us grow strong in forgiveness when we absorb them into our hearts. Thank the Lord for this gospel word about forgiving that is based on being forgiven.

May we fall down before the majesty of Jesus our king in humble recognition of the greatness of our sins against God in relation to the smallness of the sins of others against us. May the Holy Spirit give us a profound restlessness and distress when we do not forgive our brothers and sisters easily and fully; may He keep this teaching fresh at hand in our hearts so that we will be slow in anger but quick in mercy because through the death of Christ God gives us time, forgiveness and freedom. To king Jesus be all glory now and forevermore, amen.