

Chapter 75: Forgiving Your Brother

Matthew 18:21–35

Forgiveness is one of the most difficult things that Jesus calls his disciples to do. When we have been hurt by others in some way, the painful scars that endure cry out for justice. They are not easily satisfied, and they do not desire to let go of any offense until they have received the full measure of their pound of flesh as just compensation. Yet, Jesus patiently insists that we must forgive one another. If anyone had a claim not to forgive others, the sinless Son of God did; however, even as the Roman soldiers nailed him to the cross, he prayed that his Father would forgive them for their ignorance (Luke 23:34). Therefore, Jesus teaches us a difficult message: *forgive your brother from your heart.*

Legalistic Forgiveness (Matt. 18:21–22)

In the previous passage, Jesus talked about all the steps necessary to win back wandering brothers from sin (Matt. 18:15–20). While laying out those processes, Jesus walked through the full range of steps for when someone refuses to repent at every stage, including the requirement to excommunicate the person who does not even listen to the church (Matt. 18:17). In this way, Jesus talked about how the key of discipline binds in heaven whatever the church authoritatively binds on earth (Matt. 18:18). Yet, Jesus was not talking about the necessary steps before disposing of a difficult brother. The goal of church discipline, in fact, is not to get rid of someone, but is constantly working toward “winning” back a brother (Matt. 18:15; see also 1 Cor. 5:5). So, while the key of discipline includes binding, Jesus also promises that whatever the church looses on earth will be loosed in heaven. That is, when an offender repents from the sin during this process, the church’s forgiveness of that person looses them not only on earth, but in heaven itself.

Peter, then, seems to recognize how often the cycle of repentance and reconciliation might take place within a church. Thus, he asks Jesus, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (v. 21). On this proposal, Blomberg comments that “Seven is a common biblical number for completeness and goes well beyond the rabbinic maxim of forgiving three times (e.g., *b. Yoma* 86b, 87a).”¹ So, it seems that “Peter has clearly learned something from Jesus.”² From Peter’s perspective, he must have thought that stretching the number of times to forgive a brother would have seemed generous.

Yet, as Hendriksen aptly observes, “There was something wrong with Peter’s approach. It smacked of rabbinism. It sounded as if the forgiving spirit were a commodity that could be weighed,

¹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 281.

² Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 471; see also Lenski, who writes, “Peter...has progressed under his Master’s teaching. (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 719.)

measured, and counted; as if it could be parceled out little by little up to a certain well defined limit, when further distribution would have to stop.”³ We have discussed the nature of legalism at many points in our study of the Gospel of Matthew, and Jesus will go on to explain that Peter’s suggestion is essentially legalistic in three major ways. First, and most importantly, the roots of Peter’s suggestion are far from the heart of God (Matt. 15:8). As the subsequent parable will illustrate (vv. 23–35), God’s lavish generosity toward sinners should not leave us stingy in the forgiveness that we extend to others. Second, Peter may think that he is increasing the amount of forgiveness extended in comparison to the teaching of rabbinical Judaism, but he is really lowering the bar from God’s infinitely-high-as-heaven righteousness, as expressed in his forgiveness of sinners. Thus, Peter is looking for the loophole in order to relax God’s righteousness (Matt. 5:19–20). Third, Peter’s suggestion is framed as a new law—a counterfeit commandment that misses the point of Jesus’ instructions about forgiveness altogether (Matt. 15:9).

Instead of some legalistic metric, Jesus insists, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times” (v. 22). Of course, Jesus is not saying that we should keep record of all these offenses, and then shut out an offender once he seeks forgiveness for the seventy-eighth time. Rather, the number Jesus gives is “so great that keeping such a count would be almost impossible.”⁴ Thus, “This is the language of hyperbole, not of calculation.”⁵

What, then, is Jesus asking of us here? John Calvin makes two helpful clarifications. First, Calvin distinguishes between a kind of forgiveness that we might extend *before* someone asks, in addition to the full kind of forgiveness that Jesus describes here. So, Calvin writes:

If a man shall do me an injury, and I, laying aside the desire of revenge, do not cease to love him, but even repay kindness in place of injury, though I entertain an unfavorable opinion of him, as he deserves, still I am said *to forgive him*. . . . A second kind of *forgiving* is, when we receive a brother into favor, so as to think favorably respecting him, and to be convinced that the remembrance of his offense is blotted out in the sight of God.⁶

Thus, we can love and forgive people in a certain sense, even before they repent to us about their sin. Indeed, this kind of attitude is necessary for us to pursue the steps of reconciliation outlined in the previous section rightly. This kind of preliminary “forgiveness” is a part of what Jesus meant when he told us to remove the log from our eye *before* trying to remove a speck from a brother’s eye (Matt. 7:5).

Second, Calvin notes that forgiveness (even in the second sense, noted above) does not necessarily restore all trust: “Christ does not deprive believers of the exercise of judgment, so as to yield a foolish readiness of belief to every slight expression, but only desires us to be so candid and merciful, as to stretch out the hand to *offenders*, provided there be evidence that they are sincerely dissatisfied with their sins.”⁷ Thus, Calvin argues that it is entirely appropriate that we should “grant pardon when he asks it, and yet may do so in such a

³ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 704.

⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 709.

⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 705.

⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:364–65.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:365–66.

manner as to watch over his conduct for the future, that our forbearance and meekness, which proceed from the Spirit of Christ, may not become the subject of his ridicule.”⁸

Lavish Forgiveness (Matt. 18:23–27)

In v. 23, Jesus transitions to a parable about a merciful king by the phrase διὰ τοῦτο (*dia touto*), which means “on that account”⁹ or “that is why.”¹⁰ In other words, the word translated as “therefore” in the ESV here carries the specific idea of a logical consequence: i.e., because of what Jesus commands in v. 22, the parable in vv. 23–35 is true. That is, Jesus is now explaining that his kingdom operates on an economy fueled by forgiveness. Or, as France puts it, “A community of the forgiven must be a forgiving community.”¹¹

So, Jesus tells a parable of “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” (vv. 23–24). Lenski is correct in noting that this settling of accounts “does not picture the final judgment but (like Luke 16:2) a reckoning that is made during this life. It is like to that of a sinner who is brought face to face with all his sins by the awakening of his conscience. In the providence of God such hours of judgment come to us and often shake us to our inmost souls.”¹² In the course of this settling of accounts, one of the king’s slaves brought him a servant who owed a massive sum of ten thousand talents. Commentators struggle to put such a large sum in perspective: “For the purpose of comparison note that Archelaus drew an annual revenue of 600 talents from Judea and Samaria, and Herod Antipas one of 200 from Galilee and Perea.”¹³ Or, “At the rate of six denars a week (a denar for each working day, cf. 20:2, 13), it would take a laborer a thousand weeks to earn just *one* talent. To *earn* it! To *save* that amount in order to pay a debt would, of course, take much longer.”¹⁴ Or, “10,000 talents would pay for something like 200,000 man-years of labour.”¹⁵ Ultimately, I like Osborne’s way of capturing this as a number so large as to be inconceivable and essentially nonsensical: “No reader could conceive of such an amount as in this parable, and Jesus’ hearers would simply have thought of an impossibly large debt, like a child saying ‘a million gazillions.’”¹⁶

When the king discovers this great debt (and the man’s inability to pay), Jesus says that, “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” (v. 25). Importantly, Lenski notes that “The king is not represented as a tyrant;

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:366.

⁹ “...because Peter is to forgive so often, this is the reason that the kingdom has been made to be what it is.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 710.)

¹⁰ “...because the matter is as stated in verse 22, therefore in the realm of God’s grace through Christ the principle that the forgiven person must always be ready, in turn, to reveal the forgiving spirit to others, may be illustrated as follows.” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 704.)

¹¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 702.

¹² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 711.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 712.

¹⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 705.

¹⁵ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 756.

¹⁶ Osborne, *Matthew*, 695.

he acts according to strict justice.”¹⁷ Why should the king continue to float so great a debt without any consequences to the one who incurred the debt? These procedures were well known and understood—and, if painful for the family of the one who had incurred debt, everyone recognized their justice.

At this moment, the servant recognizes that he has no hope outside the mercy of the king, so that he throws himself at his king’s feet: “So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything’” (v. 26). Martin Luther has a wonderful passage that captures how this crisis of account-settling forces the man to deal with his debts:

Before the king drew him to account, he had no conscience, does not feel the debt, and would have gone right along, made more debt, and cared nothing about it. But now that the king reckons with him, he begins to feel the debt. So it is with us. The greater part does not concern itself about sin, goes on securely, fears not the wrath of God. Such people cannot come to the forgiveness of sin, for they do not come to realize that they have sin; but if they were serious about it they would speak far otherwise. This servant, too, says, before the king reckons with him, so much I owe to my lord, namely ten thousand talents; but he goes ahead and laughs. But now that the reckoning is held, and his lord orders him, his wife, his children, and everything to be sold, now he feels it. So, too, we feel in earnest when our sins are revealed in the heart, when the record of our debts is held before us, then the laughter stops. Then we exclaim: I am the most miserable man, there is none as unfortunate as I on the earth. Such knowledge makes a real humble man, works contribution, so that one can come to the forgiveness of sins.¹⁸

Remarkably, the king forgives the servant’s debt!: “And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt” (v. 27). The translation “out of pity” hides the strong word here, *σπλαγχνισθεῖς*, *splanchnistheis*, which refers to a gut-reaction of compassion.¹⁹ This compassion reflects the kind of love that led the shepherd to leave the ninety-nine to pursue the one, wandering, lost sheep—and then to rejoice upon finding that sheep (Matt. 18:12–14). Therefore, this compassion should undergird the motivations and actions of the people of God in their dealings with one another, as they pursue wandering brothers to bring them back from sin in the hopes of “winning” their brothers back, and in order to see their brothers “loosed” from the guilt and corruption of sin (Matt. 18:15–20).

Lack of Forgiveness (Matt. 18:28–35)

Sadly, the forgiven servant does not extend to others the same mercy that he himself had received: “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’” (v. 28).

¹⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 713.

¹⁸ Martin Luther, cited by Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 714.

¹⁹ See Morris: “The king was a compassionate man, and Jesus employs a verb that indicates that he was deeply moved in his pity.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 474.)

Hendriksen observes that the man “started this cruelty of grabbing by the throat, etc., even before *speaking* to his fellow servant.”²⁰ Although this man had received unfathomable kindness from the king, “that astounding experience which snatched him and his family from their doom produces no glow of gratitude and generosity in his soul; it leaves him cold.”²¹

Even when the man pleads with him to “have patience” (v. 29) with him—exactly what he had asked for from the king—he is unmoved:²² “He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt” (v. 30). This verse draws a very strong contrast against the compassion of the king, since the phrase for “refused” is οὐκ ἠθέλην (*ouk ēthelen*), “was not willing.” Lenski writes, “The contrast is glaring. It lies in the will, the center of the personality.”²³

Upon witnessing this, the man’s fellow servants report what they have seen to their master (v. 31). Upon hearing this report, the master is furious with his “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?” (vv. 32–33). The statement of the king (who represents God in this parable) explains the logical connection between Jesus’ statement to Peter earlier that he must forgive his brother seventy-seven times. If *we* have been forgiven of our infinitely heinous crimes against an infinitely holy God, so then must we also forgive others as God has forgiven us. The ESV translates the conclusion to this story this way: “And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt” (v. 34). The word for “jailers,” however, really means “torturers.”²⁴ This man will suffer greatly because of his gratitude.

Jesus then concludes the parable simply, but sternly: “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (v. 35). The economy of forgiveness in Christ’s kingdom is established on the basis of God’s own forgiveness of us. Lest we miss this point, Jesus warns about eternal condemnation for those who despise God’s forgiveness so much that they do not forgive other people. This is not to say that such people were forgiven by God for a certain time so that they then lose that forgiveness. Rather, Jesus is talking about people who despise God’s offer of forgiveness (an offer which is genuine) so that God’s love never really permeates their hearts. Thus, they continue living selfishly, proving that they never knew the love of God through his forgiveness in the gospel.

Discussion Questions

1. How many times did rabbinic Judaism teach that someone must forgive someone else? Why do you think that Peter suggested a number more than twice that amount? How does Peter’s answer still fall into the trap of legalism? What seems good and right and just to us about limiting the number of times we forgive someone else? Why does Jesus refuse to allow us to order our actions on the principles of legalism?

²⁰ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 707.

²¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 717.

²² Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 539.

²³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 719.

²⁴ So Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 477; France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 708; and Carson, “Matthew,” 460–61.

2. How does the parable in vv. 23–35 follow as the natural consequence of what Jesus said in v. 22? What basis does this parable establish for forgiving our brother seventy-seven (i.e., an unlimited number of) times? How much did the servant owe? What did justice require for his extraordinary debt? What role does the compassion of the king play in forgiving the debt? What does this lavish forgiveness tell us about the heart of God toward sinners?

3. What do the actions of the “wicked servant“ tell us about his appreciation for the magnitude of his forgiven debt? Why did such lavish forgiveness fail to change his heart? Why do you think that legalism always seeks leniency for self, but then turns around with crushing severity toward others? Do you see anywhere in your life where you have made special pleading for yourself, but then turned around and denied the same mercy toward others?

4. Where are you stingy to forgive someone else? What justifications do you give for ongoing bitterness and cruelty (in thought, word, or action) to those who have sought your forgiveness? How do those justifications melt in the light of God’s forgiveness of you? How might you meditate more on God’s own lavish forgiveness today? Who is one person whom you need to forgive today?