



RESOLVING CHURCH CONFLICT, PART 2

FORGIVE AS WE HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN

PSALM 103:8-13; MATTHEW 8:21-35

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Our scripture today comes from the 18th chapter of Matthew. To understand the full scope of this scripture, we need to consider the whole chapter because it is all about the same topic: humility and forgiveness. The first part of chapter 18, verses 1-14, shows us the extent to which God humbled himself to save the lost. The rest of the chapter speaks of our responsibility to humble ourselves and forgive others.

This chapter opens with the disciples quibbling over who will be the greatest in the Kingdom. For the most part, they are still thinking of a physical, earthly kingdom. They are looking to be a part of the privy council to the king, the ones who will help him make decisions and carry out the business of the Kingdom. They even are looking to know who the prime minister will be. But how does Jesus respond? He does not rebuke them, at least not in the way we would anticipate. He brings forward one of the children that are there, and then says, “Whoever knows how to be like this child will be the greatest.” In Jesus’ day, children were considered as nothing. To be seen and not heard was too high of a consideration. Children were powerless and often overlooked and given little or no consideration. The disciples want to know who will be the greatest, but Jesus says the greatest is the one who emulates the lowest in the social order.

The question to us is, are we willing to be considered the lowest, the least? Are we willing to serve Christ, with no acknowledgment of our efforts and not complain? Or do we have to have someone acknowledge what we have done? I think of my dad in this regard. He was a man who neither needed nor desired acclaim. He only wanted to do the right thing. I remember when I was a young boy, he bought his snowblower. After using it on our driveway, he told me, well, we can’t ignore Ruth, our neighbor across the street. She was recently widowed, and he felt he had to help her out. It then grew to about ten neighbors. After the first year, one of the neighbors gave him a gift at Christmas, and he got a little put off by it. He commented that he didn’t do it for that and wished they hadn’t done it. But that is who he was. He didn’t need any acclaim. Isn’t this how a child is? They are not concerned about what others think, and don’t worry if someone gives them a compliment or not. This is how we are to come to God as a little child, knowing that we are nothing, that we are not worthy of His grace. We are to be willing to be considered as the lowest, the least.

Along with this attitude of humility is the idea that one believer does not cause another to stumble. We must always take the attitude that other believers are just as worthy, if not more so than we are. As Paul says in Philippians, we are to consider others as better than ourselves. If we cause another to stumble, that is to fall away from God, we are worthy of God's wrath. Jesus goes on to say that God loves his children so much that, like a shepherd, He would leave the flock to find the one who has wandered off. Jesus himself is the perfect example of how much God loves his children. He humbled himself to such a degree that He became a human, and took on the form of a servant, and became obedient to death. This was the humility to which God lowered himself and the example of how we should be with one another.

The next thing that Jesus talks about concerns interpersonal relationships and how to handle fractures within the community. Following the general guidelines of the Torah, it is encouraged that two or three people be present, as witnesses, but notice that the object of this is not to discipline a member; preferably, it is to restore the person to fellowship and to have a broken relationship repaired. To do this requires the first part of this scripture to be in operation: humility, not thinking of ourselves as better than another but esteeming everyone with equal love and grace. It's interesting to note also, that the scripture we love to quote, "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them," comes out of this context in which Jesus is talking about how to restore a brother or sister to fellowship properly, it's not really about when we gather for worship. The meaning of what you bind or loosen on earth is bound or loosened in Heaven also comes from this context. What the community decides is what Heaven will endorse because Jesus, the righteous judge, is present when two or three are gathered in His name.

Jesus then turns his comments to speak about how we are to humble ourselves with regards to forgiving others, and this is the subject of today's scripture. On the heels of talking about restoring relationships, Peter then comes up to ask, well, how many times should I forgive someone? Do I keep going to that person over and over? Is there a limit? Should I forgive him seven times? Jesus then takes the Old Testament idea of exacting vengeance and applies it to granting forgiveness. In Genesis 4, we read the story of Cain and Abel. Cain kills his brother. God punishes him. We then read the lineage of Cain's children, and a great-grandson named Lamech makes the statement that he killed a person. Lamech states that, if Cain is avenged seven times, Lamech will be avenged 77 times.

In the Old Testament, vengeance was part of the code. If someone did you wrong, you were entitled to exact payment, in some form, from that person, but in this scripture, Jesus takes an Old Testament principle and turns it around. In the Kingdom that He is bringing into the world, it is not vengeance that rules the day. In the Kingdom of the Messiah, grace and mercy become the measure by which we live and deal with one another. So, Jesus says to Peter, you don't forgive seven times, but seventy-seven times. The number seven speaks of several things in the Old Testament. It speaks of completeness and perfection. It also is used in terms of pardon and healing. [The literal translation of Jesus' statement here reads you are to forgive "seventy times [and] seven."] What this means is that we are to have a super-abundance of forgiveness and when we think we've forgiven enough, then go even more. This reflects the previous section where the subject is the idea of restoring a relationship. We are to forgive and forbear, for as much as it takes to heal, and to restore, a relationship with a brother or sister. Forgiveness does not end.

Jesus then tells a parable to illustrate this. Jesus' first words are, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." In typical Jewish thought, this was how a rabbi would often teach his disciples. He would make a statement and then illustrate it by telling a story. It was not to be taken literally; instead, it was the general idea of the story that was the illustration.

Jesus uses the idea of a kingdom and a king. The "kingdom" is characteristic of a Gentile kingdom, and "the king" represents God. The "servant" that is mentioned is most likely one of the king's tax-farmers or tax collectors. As typically happened in those days, a king would appoint a tax collector over a particular area, from whom the king would collect the taxes that were owed to him. The tax collector would pay this upfront and recoup his losses and make a profit by going to the people in that region to get the money from them. If there had been a bad harvest or some other economic downturn, it would put the tax collector at a loss; then, when the king came to collect the next round of taxes, the collector would not have the money to pay. He would be indebted to the king. The king would see this as a debt, but let the collector go to make it up and finally, "settle the account." In this case, whether it was once or several times, the tax collector had built up a considerable debt to the king. In the parable, we are told that he owed the king "10,000 talents." In some places, this is translated as "10,000 bags of gold."

This amount of money would have staggered the imaginations of Jesus' hearers. A bag of gold would have been the largest denomination of money in that day. The number "ten thousand" was the largest numerical designation in Greek. This amount of money would have been the total amount of currency in a small kingdom. To put this on an individual level, it would have amounted to 70 million days wages of a laborer. This figure was astronomical, and that was precisely the point Jesus was making.

The king is not happy at this situation and orders that all of the belongings of the man be sold, and he and his family be sold into slavery. None of this would repay the debt, but the king had exacted his vengeance, and what he felt was justice. With this sentence in hand, the servant falls on his knees and begs for mercy, saying that he will find some way to repay the debt. The king pauses and considers the man and forgives the debt. Jesus' listeners would have been shocked by this idea. To forgive a debt that huge was almost unthinkable, but the king does it and lets the man go free.

The next thing that we are told is that as the man was leaving his audience with the king, he comes across a fellow tax collector who owed him 100 silver coins, which would be equal to one-millionth of the previous debt. As was often done in this type of situation, the man begins to choke his fellow collector as he demands repayment of this small debt. In like fashion, the fellow tax collector drops to his knees, begging for mercy and gives the promise to repay the small debt. The tax collector, who has just been forgiven so much, does not offer this same mercy to a co-worker. Instead, he orders him to be sent to "debtor's prison" until it was repaid. When the king hears of this, he becomes enraged and recalls the first tax collector and sharply rebukes him, reinstates the debt, and has him not just thrown into prison, but sentences him to be tortured "until the debt was paid."

The question we each have to ask ourselves is, "how much have we been forgiven?" Consider the humility it took for God to step down from his glory willingly; to become human, and have the character of a servant, i.e., slave, and the all-powerful One, who created this whole cosmos, allowed himself to be man-handled and die so that you and I could be raised from the dead to walk in newness of life. Paul indeed says that we were dead in our trespasses and sins. We were without hope. Humanity had so fallen from grace that there was not the slightest possibility that we could ever do anything to restore our fellowship with the One who created us. But God, God who is rich in mercy, did all of this just so that you and I could lift our heads in confidence and approach the Throne of Grace to find help in time of need.

In like manner, do any of us have a reason not to extend the same grace to others? Consider the church splits that have happened because one person gets offended over the actions of another. Divisions occur within families because someone does something that personally affects our character or wrongs us in some way. Friendships are broken because one makes a comment, and the other takes offense. You may say, “But he or she keeps doing it and won’t confess they are wrong or acknowledge the hurt it caused me!” Did anyone confess that they were wrong, or acknowledge the hurt that they had caused God before Jesus went to the cross? Did Jesus say he would not go to the cross because no one accepted the notion that they had sinned? Yet, we are so quick to condemn another because of a small offense done to us. What happened to the unforgiving servant? He was not just sent to prison; he was handed over to be tortured for an eternity “until he paid back the full amount,” and as Jesus said, *“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”*

In closing, I will re-read the scripture that Ray read earlier. Listen again as we look at Psalm 103. [Read: Psalm 103:8-17] Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

Amen.