



**Temple Baptist Church**  
Wilmington, North Carolina  
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The Lord's Day, March 19, 2017

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**What Kind of Forgiveness?**  
**Matthew 18:12-35**

Sometimes you can learn a lot from a comic strip . . .

Years ago, the *Garfield*<sup>®</sup> comic strip ran a series with Garfield playing with a rubber chicken his owner Jon had given him. Garfield had named the chicken "Stretch."

One morning at the breakfast table, Garfield startles Jon by sticking Stretch up next to him and making a loud chicken sound, "PUCUCK!" Jon's coffee goes in the air, and he yells: "One more stunt like that and I'm going to wring your rubber chicken's neck!" Garfield looks very dejected, so Jon apologizes, "I'm sorry I snapped at you, Garfield. Will you forgive me?" Garfield smiles and says, "I forgive you." Then he slaps Jon in the back of the head with the chicken and says, "But Stretch doesn't!"<sup>1</sup>

Now we'd never approach forgiveness that way—or would we?

As we've been focusing on Matthew's account of the Gospel, we've seen his emphasis on the kingdom of heaven, God's kingly rule. Thinking about forgiveness in this kingdom context during this Lenten season raises a crucial question: *What kind of forgiveness does living under God's rule demand from us?* What we often think is forgiveness isn't really forgiveness at all in the *biblical* sense of the word. Something's missing in our practice.

So just what is *kingdom forgiveness*? How can we practice and experience it in our human relationships?

We could turn to a number of passages in the Bible on this issue, but I want us to focus on our text from Matthew 18:12-35, where *Jesus taught his disciples how they must reclaim wayward believers through loving accountability and unlimited mercy*. He was telling them about the kind of forgiveness his kingdom demands.

Now as we look this text, we need to keep in mind two crucial things about forgiveness from a biblical perspective. First, forgiveness is *not* pretending something never happened, or sweeping it under the rug. True forgiveness deals with offenses head-on. And second, forgiveness isn't a feeling; it's *an act of the will*, a conscious decision not to hold something against the offender any more. Positive feelings toward the person we forgive will usually follow, but that often takes time.

***Two parables and a plan***

As Jesus teaches his disciples about forgiveness, he first he tells *the parable of the wandering sheep* (18:12-14). It's basically the same story he told in Luke 15:3-7, but there Jesus used the image to talk about saving the lost. Here Jesus applies the story in a different way. The shepherd's finding one sheep that's wandered off is about *reclaiming a believer* who has gone astray. Jesus' point: "In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish" (18:14).<sup>2</sup>

Then Jesus gives *a plan for dealing with offenses in his church*: “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you” (18:15).

Did you catch what he said? “*Just between the two of you*”—but what do we usually do? We find somebody we think will be sympathetic and say, “Do you know what \_\_\_\_\_ did to me?” You know what I’m talking about!

But Jesus says that rather than going to someone else, we should go to the person we have the problem with, doesn’t he? He says that when we do, if the offending brother or sister listens to us, we have won them over. Reconciliation happens and the relationship is restored.

But if they won’t listen, then the second step Jesus gives is to take one or two others along as witnesses to the attempt to hold the offender accountable and bring them to repentance. It’s not a matter of trying to get an offended person to forgive; the one who has been offended is the one seeking to restore the relationship. It’s a matter of trying to get the offender to repent!

So Jesus goes on to say, “If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (18:17). In other words, anyone who still refuses to repent even when the church is holding them accountable makes it questionable whether they ever really was a part of the church. Since they have refused loving attempts to restore fellowship, the person has made himself or herself a candidate for evangelism! Jesus declares that he gives his church under his guidance authority to make decisions about behaviors that are to be prohibited (bound) and permitted (loosed), assuring them that when two or more gather in his name, he is there to guide them in dealing with such matters (18:18-20).

At this point, Peter comes to Jesus and asks him, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins? Up to seven times?” (18:21).

Jesus’ answer must stun him. Here Peter thinks he’s being very generous to offer forgiveness seven times! But Jesus tells him, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (18:22). A number of translations render this as “seventy times seven.” In that culture, combining seventy and seven meant that something is *unlimited*. In other words, there’s to be no limit to how many times a follower of Jesus forgives a repentant offender!

Then Jesus tells the second parable about “a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants” (18:23). One was brought to him who owed him “ten thousand bags of gold (lit., talents)”—an amount that there was no way he could ever repay. As David Garland points out in his commentary on this passage, “Ten thousand was the highest number in arithmetic (like our billion), and the talent was the highest currency.”<sup>3</sup> It actually computes to about 200,000 years of a regular laborer’s wages.<sup>4</sup> There was no way he could ever pay it, so “the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt” (18:25). At this the servant fell on his knees, begging his master for patience so he could pay him back. Moved with pity, the master went beyond patience to mercy, *canceling* the debt and letting him go.

Great story, right? But it doesn’t stop there. This servant whose unpayable debt had been forgiven went out and found a fellow-servant who owed him a hundred silver coins (lit., denarii), about a hundred day’s wages—a significant amount, but a drop in the bucket compared to what this servant had owed the king. You’d think he would have shown his fellow servant the same kind of mercy and compassion, right? But no, he grabbed him, started choking him and demanded that he pay him what he owed. The fellow servant offered the same plea for patience with the same promise to repay. But rather than even giving him time, he had him thrown in prison.

The other servants saw it and were distressed. They told the king about it. He summoned the

first servant and reminded him what he had done for him. He told him, “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you?” (18:33). Then he had him put in jail to be tortured until he could repay *all he owed*.

And then Jesus drove it home: “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (18:35).

### ***Putting it into practice***

What Jesus said here as he taught his disciples that day tells us three important things about the kind of forgiveness that the kingdom of God requires.

First, *kingdom forgiveness takes the initiative to restore the injured relationship*. This is rooted in and modeled after God’s forgiveness, just as Jesus pointed out in these parables. When the sheep wanders off, the shepherd doesn’t wait for it to come back on its own, he goes after it! The king decides that it’s time to settle accounts with his servants. He knows this servant could never repay what he owes, so he cancels the debt, though the servant only pleads for patience, not mercy.

My brothers and sisters, God took the initiative to reconcile us—salvation’s plan in eternity, the incarnation of the Son, his life, death, and resurrection. God didn’t wait for us to decide to repent—we never would have! He came to us, wrought salvation for us, and sent his Spirit to convict us and draw us to himself! *He took the initiative!*

So when a brother or sister goes astray in sin, Jesus tells us to take the initiative to go show them their fault privately, and to continue in the process until they hear and repent. Rather than pridefully waiting for an apology, we’re to seek to restore the relationship with the offender. We must take the initiative, but all the while realizing that the offender is responsible for his or her response!

Second, *kingdom forgiveness lovingly holds the offender accountable*. We don’t do erring brothers or sisters any favors by not holding them accountable!

You know, it’s dangerous to let children “get away” with things. It’s even more dangerous to let criminals “get away” with things. And it’s dangerous both for the erring brother or sister and for the church to let believers who wander but remain unrepentant “get away” with it!

The pattern Jesus laid out is clear—wrongs should be dealt with *privately first*; but when the offender refuses to repent, it begins to affect the larger fellowship, and *the church* must hold the person accountable!

In his dealings with the churches, the Apostle Paul developed and applied what Jesus taught here. It’s what we call “church discipline,” something we as Baptists seldom practice any more except in the most extreme cases, and sometimes not even then!

In the New Testament, the purpose of discipline was always *redemptive* rather than punitive, and was applied in three cases: (1) refusal to repent of gross immorality; (2) divisiveness; and (3) heresy when it became divisive. In all cases, what was at stake was *the unity of the church and the integrity of its witness*. The purpose was always *redemption* and *not retribution*—seeking to reclaim the wanderer! If he or she rejected repeated attempts to bring them to repentance, the church had to be protected!

But what about Jesus’ command not to judge in Matthew 7? Jesus is talking about a judgmental attitude, and about dealing with our own sins before we approach a brother or sister, and about major versus minor issues. In Luke 17:3-4, just as here in Matthew 18, Jesus makes it

clear that we're to hold one another accountable, seeking to bring about repentance when it's needed.

Or let me put it another way. Loving accountability is *an integral part of forgiveness!* If we don't hold the offender accountable, what is there to forgive?

Finally, *kingdom forgiveness shows unlimited mercy to the repentant offender* (18:21-35). When the offender repents, we must forgive, freely and fully! We must show *unlimited mercy* to those who repent. God has forgiven us; how can we not forgive those who repent? Just as God forgives us on the basis of what Christ has done on the cross and in his resurrection, so we forgive others on the basis that in Christ, God forgave us (Ephesians 4:32)!

Or as the great 19<sup>th</sup>-century British Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon put it: "So, until we leave off sinning, we must never talk of not forgiving other people . . . ."<sup>5</sup>

Forgiveness means letting go, giving up our right to exact punishment from the one who has offended us, choosing to set aside the offense so that it's no longer a stumbling block in the relationship. With all that God has forgiven us, how can we refuse to forgive our brother or sister? If we do, we are indeed turned over to the torturers! After all, it's those who hold on to their hurts and nurse grudges who are tortured by them.

By what Jesus taught his disciples that day, we see that *kingdom forgiveness consists of loving accountability coupled with unlimited mercy.*

Loving accountability without unlimited mercy is *not* kingdom forgiveness. Unlimited mercy without loving accountability is *not* kingdom forgiveness,

Think of it in mathematical terms. I believe we can sum up the meaning of this text in the form of an equation: *Loving accountability + unlimited mercy = kingdom forgiveness.*

Are you practicing *kingdom* forgiveness?

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Davis, *Garfield*®, © 1984 United Feature Syndicate, Inc., 10/21/1984.

<sup>2</sup> Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® (2011 edition).

<sup>3</sup> David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 194.

<sup>4</sup> Based on NIV and ESV footnotes on Matthew 18:24.

<sup>5</sup> *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Sermon #3158, "The Fifth Beatitude," preached 12/21/1873; <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols55-57/chs3158.pdf>; p. 4; accessed 3/15/17.