

Forgiveness

📖 Matthew 18:21-35

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Matthew is known for his discourses. He gives narrative to set the context for each discourse. The first discourse is Matt 5-7, *The Discourse on Kingdom Righteousness*. It presents the righteousness necessary for Israel to enter the kingdom. The second discourse is Matt 10, *The Discourse on Kingdom Missions*. It presents the mission to the house of Israel calling them to repent when the kingdom is at hand. That mission in the 1st century was unsuccessful as evidenced by their rejection of John, the forerunner of the King, in Matt 11 and their rejection of Jesus, the King Himself, in Matt 12. In light of the rejection the third discourse is Matt 13, *The Discourse on Kingdom Postponement*. It presents new truths relative to the arrival of the kingdom that would be understood only by those who understood prior teaching. The new truth was that the kingdom would not arrive right away but would be postponed until a generation of Israel came along and repented. During the postponement the sons of the kingdom would grow alongside the sons of the evil one and at the end of the age the angels would be sent forth to separate the sons of the evil one in judgment and to bring the sons into the blessing of the kingdom.

The fourth discourse is Matt 18, *The Discourse on Kingdom Greatness*. And as you can see all of the discourses relate in some way to the kingdom. Since the kingdom was now being postponed that meant a period of time was opening up before the kingdom's arrival. Jesus had announced that He would build His Church during this period of time. As such the Church is a period of preparation for the kingdom to come. Jesus' disciples had been discussing among themselves which of them might be the greatest in the kingdom. Jesus told them three ways they could prepare to be great in the kingdom. First, in Matt 18:1-14 they would have to develop humility. A truly humble person does not depreciate himself or appreciate himself but recognizes his or her gifts, calling and responsibility within the plan of God and dispenses of them accordingly. He or she has a sober and accurate estimate of themselves. This proper estimate of oneself is necessary to be great in the kingdom. Second, in Matt 18:15-20 they would have to develop honesty. A truly honest person does not overlook sin in himself or others but is careful to evaluate himself before pointing the finger at others. His standard of righteousness is always the word of God and never human opinion or scruples. When he is offended by a brother he does not wait on the

brother to come to him but takes the initiative and confronts his brother with an honest evaluation, seeking restoration.

Let's review the four steps. In 18:15, keep in mind that when Jesus says, "If your brother sins," he is probably referring back to verse 10, the sin of despising a brother. I wouldn't limit it to that sin in the application, but in context that is the sin that seems to be in view since this is a connected discourse and every part relates to every other part. So if your brother despises you, the brother may not have known that he has done this and so the offended brother is required to take the first step toward reconciliation. The first step is to "go and show" the offending brother his fault in private. To do this correctly requires loving humility. It is difficult to receive a rebuke but it is even more difficult to administer one in loving humility. That is why developing this kind of honesty is necessary to being great in the kingdom. It requires great skill. And if the brother listens to you, you have won your brother. It is a great victory because it brings fellowship and unity and this passage is given in anticipation of the formation of local churches. Christ has great desire for purity and fellowship and unity in the local church. When sin is not dealt with a root of bitterness can form causing trouble and dissension (Heb 12:15). A root of bitterness should never be allowed to form. It is one of the greatest problems local churches face. The humble and honest disciple will head this off by confronting such instances in order to reconcile. If it works, wonderful, the confrontation is over. But if not, in 18:16 step two, "If he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed." The two or three are taken to confirm the response of the sinning brother, not to witness the sin. Evidently in this case the offense occurred only between two people. Things are different when the sin is out in the open as in 1 Cor 5; the man who was having relations with his step-mother. In those cases, you are already at step four, some degree of separation is absolutely necessary. But in this case it was only between two brothers. And at this stage two or three are taken to confirm the offender's refusal to repent and reconcile. The two or three would preferably be disciples who are very close to the person and not just other believers. The goal is to gain reconciliation if possible. However, if unsuccessful, in 18:17 step three, "if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." This is Matthew's second use of "the church" which are the only two uses in all four Gospels. It was uttered by Jesus in anticipation of what we know as the local church. The church universal did not begin until Acts 2 and local expressions of it did not begin until thereafter. Obviously the disciples did not understand what Jesus meant by "the church" at this time. They understood the term only as one of "a gathering" or "assembly." They were familiar with the synagogue gathering and discipline within that context and probably interpreted Jesus' statement in those terms. Soon enough though, the church would begin. The epistle of James indicates that the earliest church still met in synagogues but soon enough they would separate. The church then began to meet in homes where groups were smaller than larger churches today. As such we should exercise great caution in taking a sin before an entire congregation of modern proportions. Some churches are 300, 1,000, 5,000 or even more. It is unthinkable that one person's sin, obviously unknown to many present, should be taken before the entire assembly. Beyond the mere proclivity to gossip is the fact that visitors may be present. Wisdom dictates

that the best thing to do is get a substantial number of those closest to the offender, say 10 or 20, and tell it to them. This will communicate great concern as well as respect for privacy so that the sinning person is brought to repentance and reconciliation. However, if this still does not work then in 18:17 a fourth step is necessary, "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." This meant some degree of separation from or exclusion of the person in every day and congregational worship associations. What degree is not stated. The congregation of disciples would discuss this in detail and decide what would be most effective at bringing about repentance and reconciliation. In 18:18 Jesus gives a promise regarding their decision. These are the verses that are commonly misunderstood but they relate directly to the subject at hand. The terms "bound" and "loose" were judicial terms for "forbid" and "permit." What Jesus is doing is making a promise regarding their judicial decision regarding the sinning person. Jesus says, "Truly I say to you, whatever associations you forbid on earth shall have been forbidden in heaven; and whatever associations you permit on earth shall have been permitted in heaven." In other words, it's a promise that their decision would have heaven's backing. They are merely carrying out heaven's rule regarding this person. 18:19 is usually pulled out of context and used for prayer. There are many promises about prayer but this is not one of them. The word "again" signifies that no new information is being given, beyond that given in verse 18. It is a mere repetition of the content of verse 18. "Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything." The word "anything" means "that which is to be done, the undertaking" with respect to the sinning person, and in this case refers to the judicial decision that they have made. The word "ask" means "demand" and refers to what they demand with respect to the "sinning person." In that case, "it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven." That is to simply to say that the Father would support this decision. It is to be understood as a promise of God to claim. In 18:20 the explanation for why is revealed, "Because where two or three have gathered together in My name," that is, having come to a decision that is in accord with what Christ would decide, "I am there in their midst," meaning simply that Christ would be with them in their course of action. These verses are difficult to understand in the English but to paint the whole picture that Jesus has painted, the coming Church age is an age of preparation for the kingdom to come. Every believer is to prepare himself by fulfilling his or her ministry. In our individual ministries we are to carry them out in Jesus' name. We are to recognize others who are truly ministering and not despise them. If we despise them, we are sinning. In such a case the offended brother is to confront the offender in order to rectify the situation so that ministry can go on unhindered. If a private confrontation does not result in reconciliation, then two or three close disciples should go to the brother. If the two or three are unsuccessful then take it to a larger number of close disciples. If this is still unsuccessful at rectifying the situation, then the two or three or perhaps the larger number of close disciples should carefully make a judicial decision regarding the degree of separation from the brother until such time he is reconciled. The door should always be left open for restoration. When such procedures are carefully considered the decision is backed up by the full approval of both the Father and the Son.

Tonight we come to 18:20 and since a door must always be left open for forgiveness and restoration Peter quite naturally asked the follow-up question, **Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?** It should be noted that in view is a **brother**. This is an issue within the local church between two brothers. How many times shall **I forgive him**, Peter asks? **Up to seven times?** Peter thought he was being quite liberal here. Pentecost said, "The Pharisees taught that righteousness demanded that a person be forgiven twice. If a person wanted to prove himself magnanimous, he forgave three times."¹ Walvoord citing Lenski said, "The old Jewish teaching was that three times was enough," based on Amos 1:3 and 2:6. Peter was attempting to be generous in doubling the usual limit of forgiveness."² So Peter saw himself as being very gracious in being willing to forgive up to seven times. A very magnanimous rabbi would forgive up to a maximum of three times; Peter was thinking he would be far more magnanimous and forgive **up to seven times**. Peter obviously did want to be very great in the kingdom.

But what Jesus said next in 18:19, which constitutes true greatness, went far beyond both three and seven. **Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."** The parallel in Luke 17:4 says "seven times a day." So the Matthew account says **seventy times seven** which is 490 times and the Luke account says seven times per day. That is a lot of sins. So many that the obvious point is *not* that you are counting up to 490 times and then refusing to grant forgiveness the 491st time or counting up to seven times a day and then refusing to grant forgiveness the eighth time, but simply that you are not counting their sins at all. What Jesus is teaching is that forgiveness of our fellow brothers is to be unlimited. Pentecost said, "To the Jewish mind, this meant times without number."³ That is what is required to be magnanimous in the kingdom.

In 18:23 Jesus gives a parable to illustrate. The parable makes a comparison with the kingdom. Remember that Jesus began to speak in parables in Matthew 13. The purpose of speaking in parables was to reveal further truths to those who had understood prior truths and to conceal further truths from those who had not understood prior truths. This was a blessing on those who were following after Him and a cursing on those who were not following Him. In this parable about forgiveness Jesus says, **For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.** When we read the expression **kingdom of heaven**, which is literally in the Greek a plural, "kingdom of the heavens," we recall that it is used exclusively by Matthew. Why? Because Matthew was writing his gospel primarily to believing Jews who were discussing the Messiahship of Jesus with unbelieving Jews. And what did all Jews have a sensitivity to with respect to the name of God? They had a sensitivity to overusing the name of God. Even today Jews write G-d so as to avoid using the name of God. What the 1st century Jews did was substituted "the kingdom of the heavens" for "the kingdom of God." How do we know this? Because in parallel passages in Mark and Luke the expression "kingdom of God" is used. So the terms "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God" are synonyms; both refer to the one kingdom covenanted to Israel which had fallen at the time of the Babylonian exile and was to be restored in the future when the Messiah came and established it on earth, ruling from David's throne in Jerusalem. Further we know they were synonymous because on the occasion that Matthew does use "kingdom of God," as in 19:24, he does

so in parallel with “kingdom of heaven” in the previous verse. I periodically review this because earlier dispensationalists made an artificial distinction between the two, as for example, in the Scofield Reference Bible, which says on Matt 3:2 that “kingdom of heaven” refers to the “earthly sphere of profession” as contrasted to the universal kingdom of God, which is a bogus distinction. However, you should be aware that this note was not in the original Scofield Reference Bible. If you want to know what Scofield thought you have to get a pre-1967 version of the Scofield Reference Bible. I doubt you have one so if you want to take a look at his note, which is pretty good, I have a 1945 version here. In 1967 a committee was put together that revised the notes. It’s those notes on Matt 3:2 that make the distinction between “kingdom of heaven” and kingdom of God.” But scripturally “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven” are synonymous expressions referring to one and the same kingdom, the kingdom covenanted to Israel to be established on the face of the earth in the future with the Messiah ruling from David’s throne in Jerusalem.

Jesus is making a comparison with this kingdom. The comparison Jesus is making does not mean that the kingdom had already come but simply that a comparison is being made with the kingdom that will come in the future. What is the comparison? Toussaint saw the comparison best when he said, “In order for one to be able to enter the kingdom he must be forgiven an infinite amount by God; therefore all who are anticipating entrance are under obligation to show all possible consideration to others in the matter of forgiveness.”⁴ In other words, Peter was thinking he was quite liberal in being willing to forgive a brother up to seven times, but how much has God forgiven us so that we could have kingdom entrance? He has forgiven us an infinite amount. Without His forgiveness we could not even enter the kingdom. How much then should we forgive our brothers? This is an argument from the greater to the lesser. The Scriptures often use this line of argument. If God has forgiven us such a great amount how much more ought we be willing to forgive our brother a lesser amount. And yet, even though God has forgiven us so much there are still many believers that refuse to grant forgiveness to another believer because what they did was so bad or what they do they keep on doing. And because of this they reach a limit and they will not forgive them anymore. What Jesus is saying is that this is not the way of God. God has dealt with us by infinite forgiveness. We ought to forgive one another without limit. This gives every one of us a lot to think about.

The illustration is from **a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves**. So obviously the **slaves** owed the **king**. Who does the **king** represent? The king represents God. Who do the slaves represent? The slaves are the sons of God, His disciples. Constable said, “Immediately Jesus put the disciples in the position of servants (Gr. *douloi*) of a great king who is God. This is one of the relationships that disciples have to God that we must never forget. We are His servants as well as His sons.”⁵ In 18:24, **When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him**. What’s a **talent**? A **talent** was a measurement of weight. It was between 58 and 75lb. How much then did this slave owe him? Well, it depends on what the talent was made of. Was it bronze, was it silver, was it gold? We’re not told, we’re only told a talent. If the mention in verse 28 of **denarii**, has anything to do with it, it was silver because **denarii** were silver. But as **you see** it makes little

difference. One talent of bronze was the equivalent of \$300⁶ and so 10,000 bronze talents would equate to owing the king \$3 million. If they were silver one talent of silver was equivalent to \$1,070 and so 10,000 silver talents would equate to owing the king \$10.7 million. And if they were gold one talent of gold was \$71,250 and so 10,000 gold talents would equate to owing the king \$712.5 million. So whether it was 3 million, 10 million or 712 million you see that it makes little difference, no slave could ever pay that amount back. And that is precisely the point; the slave owed so much he could not pay it back in this lifetime or in several lifetimes.

This slave **was brought** before the king, and of course, in 18:25, we find that he could not pay, and so **his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made.** Of course, the price he received would not repay this debt and the man and his family would be sent to debtor's prison where they would work the rest of their lives trying to repay the debt. **So** in verse 26, **the slave** knew what was in store for him and his family for the rest of their lives and **so fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.'** Of course the slave could not **repay** him **everything**. He probably could not repay much at all. But is that really the point? No, the point is not what the indebted slave could do but what the king could do.

In verse 27, **And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.** The word **compassion** is from the Greek word **σπλαγχνίζομαι**. In the physical sense it refers to the internal organs, especially to the bowels or viscera. We might say the king felt this man's pain in his gut. Metaphorically that translates into **pity**. The king had **pity** for the slave. And because of this pity the king **forgave him the debt.** This was millions of dollars. It was a lot to forgive. And it is a picture of what God forgives us in order to grant us entrance into His kingdom. The man had great financial debt, we had great sin debt. The man owed millions of dollars, we owe for millions of sins. The man could never repay him; we could never repay Him. But just as the king had great pity on him and forgave the debt so God had great pity on us and forgave our debt.

Now at the time the Messiah had not yet shed His blood to pay the debt so that God could grant forgiveness to all who believe. But this is in anticipation of the debt being paid on the cross and the granting of forgiveness of all sin for those who believe. And so the lesson is clear; God forgives every believer such a great sin debt to enter the kingdom that we ought to forgive other believers their sins against us and we should not put limits on how much or how many times we will forgive.

Alright, what happened in this situation? In 18:28 **But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii.** The **denarii**, again, was a silver coin which makes me think that the talents referred to earlier were probably silver talents. A denarius was worth about a day's wage. So **a hundred denarii** were the equivalent of 100 days' wages. Now compare the two? The first slave owed the several lifetimes of wages and this slave only owed his fellow slave 100 days' wages. That is the point. That is a great difference. The one could never be repaid, the other could easily be repaid. How would the slave treat his fellow slave? Let's see. **He seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.'** And in verse 29, **his fellow slave**

fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' But verse 30, **he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.** He cast him in the debtors' prison. He did not forgive even a small debt when he had been forgiven such a great debt. That is what we are doing when we refuse to forgive someone. This is a deeply distressing thing. It is amazing that God puts up with us.

Verse 31, **So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved.** You know, often outsiders can see the situation much clearer than we can. They can see the great incongruity of our actions. That is what these fellow slaves saw. It caused them deep grief. They were deeply pained over it. So what did they do? They **came and reported to their lord all that had happened.** This was something that could not go overlooked. It was too great a trampling upon mercy. It was too hard-hearted to not come to the attention of the king. It had to be reported and they did report it.

After the king heard the report, in 18:32, he **summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?'** Alright, I think we get the point. We have each of us been granted infinite mercy from Pentecost said, "Peter, then, was represented by the man with the insurmountable indebtedness." Pentecost thought the man represented Peter. I think it's just a disciple in general, but he could be correct. Certainly in verse 35 He applies it to all disciples. "Peter, then, was represented by the man with the insurmountable indebtedness. But God had freely forgiven Peter all of his indebtedness. Peter, then, was obligated to forgive others who may have wronged him but whose wrong was a mere pittance in comparison with the wrong he had done to God and for which he had received forgiveness....Christ said he should forgive as many times as God had forgiven him. This puts great responsibility on the believer."⁷ And that it does.

So we come to verse 34 and the hard saying, **And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.** Now probably, just so we don't lose the heart of the argument, the context in view is forgiving a brother who has wronged you and you went through the four steps of verses 15-20 so that the man was under a judicial decision facing some degree of exclusion. And the point is that if he does repent after all of this, admitting he was in the wrong and you won't forgive him then that is a very dire situation indeed. Forgiveness is necessary. The only question is, what exactly with the heavenly Father do to those who do **not forgive him from the heart?** The king, in verse 34, **handed the slave over to the torturers until he should repay every last cent.** The **Father**, we are told, **will do the same to you.** There are several views as to what this means. **First**, some say it means that a believer can lose his salvation. This conditions eternal salvation on forgiving one another rather than on faith alone as so many passages clearly attest. When we come to an unclear passage the rule of thumb is to allow it to be interpreted in a way that is consistent with the clearer passages. To say that a believer can lose his salvation if he does not forgive another is contrary to the

abundance of passages which teach eternal salvation is by faith alone. **Second**, some have concluded that Jesus is describing an impossible situation in order to warn the disciples of the seriousness of not forgiving one another. But warning of something that is impossible doesn't have much force. **Third**, some have argued that Jesus is warning such a person that they are not really a believer because all true believers have tasted God's forgiveness and will forgive others. In that case the person is like Judas who was a disciple but he was not a believer. It is possible to be a disciple, which is merely a learner, and not be a believer. However, this does not seem to fit the context. The context is how to become great in the kingdom. The person in view is clearly a brother and will be in the kingdom but not great in the kingdom. **Fourth**, the best argument is that Jesus is warning that the disciple will face divine discipline in this life if he does not forgive his fellow brother from his heart. Half-hearted forgiveness will not do. The word **forgive** is *αφιημι* and means "to send away, to let go, to release." To let it go from the heart is to refuse to bring it up again. We sometimes here that to forgive is to forget. It is unrealistic that we will immediately forget. It is more realistic that if we refuse to bring it up in time we will forget. The consequences for not forgiving as our heavenly Father has forgiven us are divine discipline in this life. Walvoord agrees saying, "The penalties refer to this life rather than the life to come in both instances, and chastisement can be experienced even by those who are the objects of God's grace, if they do not judge their own life in the light of God's forgiveness (cf. 1 Co 11:27-32; Heb 12:5-10)."⁸

So then, if one wants to be great in the kingdom then he will forgive his brother in the same way that God has forgiven him his infinite sin debt. Consistent with this Paul later said in 1 Cor 13:5, "love keeps no record of wrongs" (NIV). This is a high standard but entirely reasonable as it flows from God's refusal to keep record of our wrongs. If He does not keep record of our sins, we have no basis for keeping a record of others. Forgiveness is always in order, forgiveness from the heart.

In summary, the entire discourse began in verse 1 with the question, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" This question rightly assumes that there will be greater and lesser positions in the coming kingdom. Jesus has answered clearly how the greater positions are attained. **First**, by humbling oneself as a child, that is, by knowing one's place in the plan of God for this dispensation and how to use one's gifts, calling and responsibilities in the service of all. **Second**, by honestly evaluating oneself and one's own sins before looking to judge others. When judgment is necessary then the confrontation is in love seeking harmony and restoration. **Finally**, by forgiving others since God has forgiven us and to refuse to forgive another that God has forgiven is to invite His discipline in our lives. So then these three; **humility, honesty and forgiveness** are key characteristics to develop in order to be great in the kingdom. Then in 19:1 we read the words "When Jesus had finished these words," *και εγενετο οτε ετελεσεν ο Ιησους*. These words mark the end of the narrative begun in 13:53 followed by the discourse in 18:1-35. Next week we will begin the final narrative in 19:1 followed by *The Discourse on Kingdom Coming* in 24:1-25:46. Then we will wrap up with the narrative of the crucifixion and resurrection.

If there are questions about anything that needs clarification in Matt 18 now is the time to ask.

¹J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 269.

²John Walvoord, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p 138.

³J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 269.

⁴Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, p 220.

⁵Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 18:23.

⁶These values were acquired through Logos Bible Software. They are not absolute values since these commodities fluctuate in value. They are mentioned only to help believers have a reference point for the amount of forgiveness the king mercifully granted.

⁷J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 270.

⁸John Walvoord, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p 140.