

# **Forgiveness: Jesus' Plan for Healing and Reconciliation in the Church (Matthew 18:15-35)<sup>1</sup>**

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Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”

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Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matt 18:21-22).

**I**N AN OLDER conflict in the Middle East, several Americans and Europeans were kidnapped and held as hostages in Lebanon from 1985-1991. The hostages generally led a miserable life; beyond that certain captors took special interest in tormenting them. They repeatedly told Terry Anderson, the longest held

hostage, that he would be released, only to dash his hopes at the last minute again and again. The captors played games with Lawrence Jenco, too.

They discovered that he was susceptible to dizziness, so they would spin him around and around, then let him go. Dizzy and disoriented, he would bump into things, then fall over while the guards howled in laughter. Once, after he fell, one of the captors, wearing metal-tipped cowboy boots, stood on Jenco's head. Jenco couldn't defend himself, but he cried out, “I am not an insect! I am a person of worth!” Should Terry Anderson and Lawrence Jenco forgive their captors?

Should we forgive those who humiliate us and inflict physical or emotional pain on us? What about lesser offenses, acts of thoughtlessness, small betrayals, and “jokes” that amuse no one except the perpetrator? Everyone can remember offenses that make our pulse rise, whether they occurred yesterday or ten years ago, whether they happened in the kitchen or the athletic field, in the family room or the board room. At home, many were hurt by parents who meant well and tried

hard. Others suffered from fathers or mothers who neither cared nor tried. We were wounded by brothers and sisters who loved us dearly and by some who did not. Even in the church, we suffer from words spoken in haste or anger, from judgments rendered with cruelty, from promises made and not kept.

Curiously, the pain we feel may have little relationship to the offense. Sometimes it is harder to forgive small indignities, especially if they come from within the family or the church, for we expect better there. When a pagan sins against us, we half expect it. Do we suppose that strangers will sacrifice for us? Will they lay off the pursuit of their goals in order to accommodate us? No. So when they sin against us, we can say, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34, KJV).<sup>2</sup> When a brother sins against us, it hurts more because we do not expect it. It is hard to forgive them, for they *ought* to know what they do.

Christians offend each other with frightening regularity. That is why, as Jesus describes life in the family of faith in Matthew 18, he stresses the steps to take when one disciple sins against another. Since Jesus seeks harmony in the family of faith, he trains his disciples in the right way of resolving conflict. Sadly, we have many occasions to practice what Jesus preaches.

Even well-liked pastors probably suffer far more at the hands of their faithful members than from the local societies of atheists and agnostics. Church members contact us Sunday night or Monday morning to let us know how we failed and which persons we upset. We missed a crucial announcement, the music was too loud and fast, too soft and slow. And the sermon! Where can we begin? So our people try to make us conform to their concept of the ideal church. It's hard to decide: Is this behavior sinful, so that we should forgive it? Is it somewhat misguided sincerity that bothers us due to our pride?

Regardless of that, everyone who stays active in the church long enough will be wronged and

it can be all the more painful because we expect the church to be our sanctuary, our joy. So then, beyond the pain itself, we feel the anguish of shattered expectations. Clearly, we need Jesus' plan for healing and reconciliation in the body of Christ.

### **RESTORING THE SINNER: THE BASIC PLAN (18:15)**

Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you" (18:15). Every word counts here. First, the word "if" could be translated "if ever." The Greek form of the sentence is known as a general conditional sentence. Thus the point is not—if a brother ever happens to sin against you, do this and that. Rather, your brother *will* sin against you and there are principles to follow when he does.

Second, Jesus explains what to do whenever a brother *sins*. The topic is not hurt feelings, it is not annoying behavior, it is not etiquette. The topic is sin.

Third, the focus is sin "against you."<sup>3</sup> Galatians 6:1 says leaders should take steps to restore anyone who is overtaken by sin. James 5:19-20 says we are all responsible to restore a fellow believer who strays from the truth. Here Jesus says we are especially responsible to act when someone sins against us. The reasons are obvious. If someone sins against us, we have direct knowledge and experience of the sin. Further, if the sin is "against you," we are responsible to seek reconciliation of a broken relationship with a fellow Christian.

Fourth, Jesus says, "Go." Most Christians act as if Jesus said, "Sit and sulk." Or, "Tell someone else about it and hope they carry the news that you are offended back to the source." Or, "Act cold and withdrawn, until they guess that you are offended." Jesus says go, take responsibility. Too often, we consult with eight people about the best way to address the problem. Or we make pseudopious prayer requests. "We really must pray for Isadora [or Sylvester]. She is really struggling to control her tongue. Why, just the other day...." Jesus says, "Go!"

Fifth, we go and *reprove*. The term for reproof (*elenchō*) is used in two spheres: the realm of investigation and inquiry and the realm of proof and conviction. The two overlap and cohere. Investigation comes first. If the investigation uncovers a problem, the facts are essential to reproof of the sin.

If there is a sin, then, we do not simply share our feelings. We take a direct and loving approach to resolve matters quickly. We take both Scripture and evidence to prove there is a problem. We go gently, remembering our own sin (Gal 6:1). Therefore, we are not hasty to condemn. We can ask questions, allowing the offending brother to clarify. Perhaps things were not quite as they seemed. We can say, “It seemed to me that you did this, said that. Am I right? Did I miss something? Can you explain what happened?”

This is what God did when Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree. When the Lord came to them, he did not thunder accusations, he asked questions: “Where are you?”, “Who told you that you were naked?”, Have you eaten from the tree...?” (Gen 3:9-13). By asking questions, the Lord established dialogue and continued the relationship. We do the same by asking questions. It respects our brother because it assumes he has something to say.

Sixth, we go *privately*. The Greek reads, “between you and him alone.” The reason is obvious. A private conversation allows real dialogue. Public rebuke is confrontational. It makes people feel that they are under attack. They become defensive and perhaps ashamed. Their first instincts are to defend themselves or to counter-attack. Public rebuke hardly promotes listening. Jesus says the goal is to win your brother. A private talk is the way to do this.

There is exception to this: when a public person commits a public offense, it may demand a public rebuke. For example, Peter played the hypocrite and refused to associate or eat with certain Christians in Antioch simply because they were Gentiles. Thus on that occasion Paul had to rebuke him publicly (Gal 2:11-14). The situation would be

the same in the rare case where someone openly taught heresy in an evangelical church.

Finally, we go to *win our brother*. The steps for resolving problems that arise when one Christian sins against another are clear, but easier said than done, because we fear conflict. We fear that our words will sound like an affront or an insult, we fear that comments on another person’s sin will lead to a counterattack about ours. The antidote to these fears is to remember the goal of winning our brother. These principles may not work with secular people, who may not be humble and secure enough to heed a rebuke. And of course, some Christians will be defensive and self-righteous.

But disciples have every reason to be open to loving correction. After all, we confess that we are sinners and that establishes the right atmosphere: we are all under the Lord’s discipline, trying to grow in him. We advance, in part, by addressing sin and rooting it out day by day. We readily hear counsel from each other, including loving admonition. Thus, we address errors before they become major problems. To do so is an act of love, as the law says, “Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt” (Lev 19:17).

We are neither shy nor rash. We do not love to go and chastise people, but neither do we shun it. It is both sad and necessary—a sad necessity. We are not touchy, going over trivia. But if we see clear sin, major sin, if it causes a rift in a relationship, we go to bring healing. How quick should we be to go? If a matter comes to mind again and again, if it inhibits sleep (consider Eph 4:26), if it disrupts worship (consider Matt 5:23), it is probably correct to go.

#### **LISTENING TO EACH OTHER (18:15-17)**

Listening comes up three times in our passage. If our brother or sister *listens*, we win them. If not, we take it forward from there. It may be worthwhile to think briefly about listening, which has three faculties.

First, we listen with our *ears*, to hear the

words. We try to follow what others say and what they mean. If a speaker struggles to articulate a thought, we help, knowing that some things are hard to express.

Second, we listen with our eyes, watching the eyes and the body of those who speak. Are they tense? Is there something more they want to say? Does their mouth say one thing and their body another? Proverbs 14:13 says “Even in laughter the heart may ache.” As a professor, I noticed that students occasionally made appointments for the most trivial matters. Half a point on a quiz could be resolved in thirty seconds after class, but they wanted a thirty minute session. They came, we resolved the putative issue in two minutes, then they sat, a bit tense, on the edge of the chair, not quite ready to go. I would ask, “Is there something else you want to talk about?”

“Yes,” they replied, “There is one other thing. I graduate in six months and I really don’t know what to do, if you have another minute....”

Third, we listen with our heart. To listen with the heart is not to listen for emotions. In the Bible, the heart is the center of life, the core of our being. The Lord knows the secrets of the heart, tests the heart, weighs the heart, probes the heart (Ps 44:21; Prov 17:21, 21:2; Jer 17:10, 20:12). It is the source from which we speak and move. For this we must look and listen.

## **DISCIPLING THE IMPENITENT (18:16-17)**

When we speak to a sinner, the goal is to win him. Praise God, many do listen and repent. But some are impenitent. They refuse to listen, refuse reconciliation. Jesus presents a series of principles for that case. It is not an exhaustive set of directions. For example, it assumes that there were witnesses, which makes the process clearer.

First, “if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses’” (18:16). This principle, taken from Moses’ law (Deut 19:15), prevents false accusations and frivo-

lous charges. (It also shows that Jesus customarily assumes that the church will live by the law of Israel). Ideally, we hope we never need to take multiple witnesses. We hope the sinner heeds correction. Ideally, we point out the sin, encourage repentance, with a light and loving touch, and the matter is resolved, so that we need not proceed to more ominous steps.

Second, however, if the first attempt at restoration fails, the injured party brings witnesses. These would be witnesses to the offense, which is assumed to be significant and public. For a private offense, witnesses might testify that an attempt at reconciliation had taken place.<sup>4</sup>

Third, if the sinning brother still fails to respond, the church takes up the matter.<sup>5</sup> If someone remains impenitent, the church will “treat him as you would a tax collector and a sinner” (18:17). Jesus is not here telling the disciples that they ought to treat tax collectors poorly. In fact, Jesus welcomed them, along with other sinners. He does not say, “Treat them as I treat tax collectors,” he says, “Treat them as you (currently) treat them—as people who stand outside the community and its fellowship” (cf. Rom 16:17-18). That is, excommunicate them, while retaining hope of reconciliation through a fresh encounter with the gospel (1 Thess 3:14-15).

This plan is remedial, not punitive. It allows the sinner to see the gravity of his rebellion, so he may repent (1 Cor 5:1-11). It protects and purifies the church and prevents bad examples from leading others astray.

## **ACCEPTING THE MANTLE OF LEADERSHIP (18:18-20)**

Jesus lays a heavy mantle upon his church leaders as they go through the process that we call church discipline. It is such a heavy responsibility that Jesus assures the church of his presence in it. He says, “Whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven” (18:18).

In times past, certain popes claimed that Jesus

gave Peter and his successors the right to determine who could and who could not enter heaven. They claimed the authority to declare people anathema—condemned to hell. During one tragic era before the Reformation, three rival popes each condemned the other two and all their followers, so that everyone in Europe had been condemned to hell by someone who claimed to be pope!

We can establish the meaning of the keys of the kingdom by remembering that keys open doors and lock doors. To “loose,” aptly, means to open something. To “bind” is to close it. So if someone has the keys to the kingdom, he opens or closes the door to the kingdom. Those who hold the keys have a duty: to open the door, and so grant entry into the kingdom, or to close the door and so forbid entry into the kingdom. How so?

Notice that Jesus says this to Peter immediately after his confession that Jesus is Christ, Son of God and Savior. When Peter proclaims this message, he uses the keys. His message opens the door to heaven for all who believe it. The same message also closes the door to all who reject Jesus. When we proclaim Christ, we do the same. We do not open or close the door on our own authority. Speaking for the Lord, we say, “Believe in Jesus and the door to eternal life is open, even now. Reject him and it is closed.”

Matthew 16:19 literally reads, “Whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound.”<sup>6</sup> That is, what we bind or loose has already been bound or loosed in heaven. We do not determine who enters heaven and who is shut out. When we proclaim that a man or woman can attain eternal life only by trusting in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior, we only re-state what God already stated. If someone believes the gospel of Jesus Christ, he gains entry into God’s kingdom. If not, the same gospel forbids that they enter the kingdom. This is the message every sound church proclaims.

So then, whatever we say repeats God’s prior word. That is, Jesus promises well-functioning

leaders that their judgments will reflect his. Jesus here commands his disciples to bind the unrepentant and to tell them they cannot expect to enter the Kingdom if they persist in clear sin, despite serious warning. Believers are repentant; they petition God for grace. Refusal to repent, on the other hand, is a mark of unbelief, and at the last extremity requires that someone be treated as an unbeliever. When leaders take such steps, Jesus says, they do not speak on their own authority. They merely reassert what the Lord already asserted, from heaven.

God rules his kingdom by grace, but he is not permissive. He does not automatically bestow grace on everyone. He grants grace to those who confess their sin, repent, and turn to Jesus for forgiveness. If someone refuses to repent or trust Jesus or follow him, they refuse his grace and have no place in his kingdom.

Is any ecclesiastical task more excruciating than pressing on with someone who refuses to repent? Facts can be murky, motives mixed. For this sad task, Jesus gave a rich promise: “If two of you on earth agree, about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven” (18:19). We use this promise in the context of prayer and rightly so. But people abuse it when they promote the conceit that God will or must give absolutely anything we request if enough people agree and have enough faith.

Not only does this view effectively dethrone God by binding him to our wishes, it also misses the chief point of the passage, which is that the Lord is with his people in the agony of church discipline. He does not promise that if two people agree about anything whatsoever that he will grant it. He promises to aid his disciples when we meet to heal broken relationships in the church. The Greek word translated “anything” points this way. The term is better translated “matter” or “case” and refers to matters that the church has to consider.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, Jesus promises his presence when two or three gather to pursue the lost and win them: “I am with you” (18:20). The process of seek-

ing reconciliation can be painful. But we do not despair, for the Lord is with us, as we work to win our brothers and to guard the purity of the church.

What a blessed community would be ours if we followed Jesus' counsel. Everyone would seek the lost and everyone would seek to restore those who have sinned against them. Leaders would assist with the hardest tasks of discipline and restoration, knowing the Lord is with them. Throughout, we would seek his healing grace for others and, as we do, we would consider again the mercy he showed us when he welcomed us into his presence despite our sin.

By implication, if someone comes to reprove you, you should receive him. You may not want to hear his rebuke, but if he is a decent man, he takes no pleasure in the visit either. So listen, knowing he comes in a spirit of love and concern. Besides, an attempt at loving correction cannot harm us. If our brother is right, he blessed us by pointing out our sin, so that we may repent and reform. If he is wrong, we have had a season of self-examination, which cannot hurt us (cf. Prov 9:9). Some people so fear a confrontation that they feel they cannot do this. Pastors sometimes have conversations with distraught people that go this way:

"I am absolutely at my wits' end about my relationship with Kate [or Michael]. I've prayed and prayed. I've tried to be nice. I've tried to avoid her. What else can we do?"

"Tell me what happened when you talked to her."

"Oh, I could never talk to her."

But if we convince ourselves that we cannot talk to the offender, we may think we are at the end of our wits when, in fact, we have not even taken the first step in Jesus' plan for reconciliation. By confronting sin, we demonstrate that the Lord, and therefore the church, has standards. People often say that the church is a hospital for sinners, and rightly so, but the church is not a home for proud, unrepentant sinners. The church is a hospital for sinners, but the patients must at least *want* to become healthy. The Lord is holy,

and he is merciful and gracious when we fail, and he forgives when we repent. But he insists that we at least try to live in obedience.

True disciples live under the discipline of God's law and under the discipline of repentance. Teachers warn, exhort, encourage, and point out sin. In a healthy church, we are accustomed to candor about sin. We form the habit of confessing sin and seeking grace from the Lord and from each other. If we practice such candor, we will find it much easier to listen and repent when someone speaks to us about our sin.

### PETER'S QUESTION (18:21-22)

The process of church discipline raises two questions. First, if it does not work, will we have the stomach to continue? Second, if it does work, are we then *bound* to forgive the offender? When Peter said, "How many times shall I forgive my brother?", he was proposing the second question. The second question has a corollary: if we forgive, must we *forget*? Must we act as if it nothing happened? We can enlarge Peter's question this way: "I understand that if my brother sins against me, I must confront him. I also know how to proceed if he refuses to listen. But what if the first step works, so that he listens? I presume I must forgive him. But what if he offends me repeatedly? How many times do I have to forgive? Seven times?"

This is a sincere and vital question. Peter surely thought he was generous to offer to forgive seven times. Some roughly contemporary rabbis limited forgiveness to three instances of premeditated sin, since such repentance might not be genuine.<sup>8</sup> If Peter was aware of this, he might have intended to be gracious when he more than doubled that number. But Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (18:22).

One time when I spoke on this theme a woman approached me afterward with a similar question. She was having trouble with her neighbors. She had a cat who wandered into her neighbor's yard occasionally. The neighbors were aggressive; one day they picked up her cat and lobbed it back into

their yard. Remembering that good fences make good neighbors, they decided to put one up. But the neighbors didn't like the fence's sight lines, so while the owners were out, they got a saw and cut several inches off the bottom of the fence in certain spots. Unfortunately, when the neighbors cut the bottom of the fence, the cat was able to get into their yard again. When that happened, the neighbors *killed* the cat and lobbed its body over the fence. That made a total of three offenses! Was Jesus saying they had to forgive their neighbors (who, somewhat dubiously, claimed to be Christians) for these three offenses and then keep going?

These are the questions: Do we have to forgive everyone for every offense? What if the offender is not sorry? What if there is a history of mistreatment? Does Jesus want us to let people take advantage of us?

Notice that the specific topic is offenses between brothers in the Christian community. Among Christians, there are special resources for reconciliation, especially if the sinner is penitent. We have a different situation when the offender is not a Christian, or when there is no remorse. We can enumerate the possible situations and some of the responses they require as follows:

First, if a brother (or sister) sins against us and repents, Jesus declares that we must forgive. Second, if a secular person sins against us and expresses sorrow, we should take it as a happy surprise, a common grace, and gladly forgive. Third, if a secular person sins against us and shows no remorse, we still forgive in a limited sense. Jesus never says we must forgive and forget everything everyone does. But he does say, "Love your enemies" (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27). He forbids bitterness, rage, and hatred. The Lord is long-suffering and patient, abounding in mercy. We are made in his image; therefore, we should be patient and merciful. The Bible says God loved us while we were yet sinners (Rom 5:8). Therefore, we should love others while yet sinners—even if they sin against us. We cannot harbor malice toward them, but must pray that they come to faith. The final

case is the most challenging. Even if a Christian brother sins against us and refuses to express sorrow or make amends and we must follow the harrowing steps of church discipline, we do so with inner love. We do not harbor inner anger or presume to judge their hearts. We hope they cease to be obstinate lest they face final judgment. In this sense, we forgive them, even if we do not "forget" their offense in the sense of pretending it did not occur. In short, we must always forgive with the heart even if we must rebuke sin (and sinners) and take steps to prevent them from wrongdoing either us or others again.

In general, we forgive, but we do not act like wimps and do not let people shove us around. For example, if someone tells a pernicious lie about me, I must forgive the liar, but I can also insist that he help set the record straight. In other words, the phrase "forgive and forget" can be misapplied. After someone sins against us, we are not bound to pretend nothing ever happened. If a neighbor borrows money and fails to repay it, then comes to borrow more, we must forgive the offense, but we have no obligation to extend a second loan. When someone errs, we teach them, patiently hoping "God will grant them repentance" (2 Tim 2:24-25).

Still, Jesus says we must forgive repeatedly. There is a slight variation in the translations because the original is ambiguous. It probably means seventy-seven times but could mean seventy times seven. But whatever the translation, the point is the same. We can count up to three offenses and think: I forgive you once, twice, three times ... and next time I take vengeance! We can even count to seven sins: One, two, three, four, five, six, *seven*—and now you're mine, fool! But no one can count sins and hold their rage until seventy-seven. Forgiveness either becomes a way of life or we give up or blow up. Unlimited forgiveness seems impossible for unaided human nature. Therefore Jesus tells a story to motivate us to forgive in 18:23-34.

## THE UNFORGIVING STEWARD (18:23-34)

The story is straightforward. A king examines his finances and notices missing funds (18:23-24): “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.” The king summons his chief steward, evidently a high-ranking slave, to account for the deficit. The steward is responsible for the debt, but cannot repay it. He and his family shall be sold as a result, chiefly as a punishment, but also to pay a fraction of the debt (18:25).

We sense that the debt, 10,000 talents, is large. But how large? Notes in older study Bibles sometimes say 10,000 talents equals millions of dollars, but we can be far more precise. First, while the English term “talent” signifies a skill or ability, in New Testament times a talent was a unit of weight for valuable metals, chiefly silver. One talent was about seventy-five pounds of silver. Therefore, 10,000 talents equaled 750,000 pounds or 375 tons of silver. But there is a better way to set the value of a talent. One talent equaled 6000 denarii. A denarius was a day’s wage. Thus one talent equaled 20 years’ wages for a common laborer. Therefore 10,000 talents equals 200,000 years wages or 60 million days’ wages. Although people earn much more in buying power today, it would not be misleading to think, in today’s terms, of a debt of several billion dollars. That a slave could owe it is also barely conceivable. Since the servant could be sold, we assume that he was a slave. Slaves lacked freedom of movement and many other rights, but they could receive pay, own property, and enter many fields of labor. People became slaves through war, debt, or birth, but a tiny number sold themselves into slavery to gain security or an education, or to hold some of the few high positions, such as city treasurer, that were commonly occupied by slaves. A treasurer could conceivably accrue such a vast debt.<sup>9</sup> Yet, to put it another way, Josephus pegged the total annual tax yield of Palestine (which included

Judea, Samaria, Galilee and more) at only 8,000 talents – 2,000 less than the one servant owed.<sup>10</sup>

No laborer could reimburse such a debt, yet the servant begs the master for time to repay it: “Be patient with me … and I will pay back everything” (18:26). This request is so ludicrous that we wonder whether the servant is a fool or if he thinks his master is a fool. Yet, in an amazing reversal, the king does more than his faithless steward asks. Instead of granting time to repay the debt, the king “took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let him go” (18:27). He called the debt a loan, forgave it, and dismissed his steward.

The steward promptly meets a fellow slave, who owes him a smaller debt, 100 denarii. Strangely, the steward “began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me,’ he demanded” (18:28). Now 100 denarii is a substantial debt. As we said, a denarius is a days’ wage, hence the debt is 100 days’ wages. Counting days of rest, a man might earn 100 denarii in about four months. Most people would be quite concerned if someone owed them four months’ wages. On the other hand, the king just forgave a far greater debt—600,000 times more, to be precise.

At this point, the second servant “fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back’” (18:29). This plea sounds familiar; these are almost the same words the steward used before the king as he pleaded for mercy moments earlier (in 18:26). We hear the similarity, but evidently the steward did not. He tossed his fellow servant into debtor’s prison, “until he could pay the debt” (18:30).

Other servants witness this and report it to the king, who calls his steward to account a second time. “‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ (18:32-33).<sup>11</sup> Then the master turned the steward over to the jailers to be tortured until he repaid his debt” (18:34).

In case we have any doubts, Jesus gives us a key to the interpretation of the parable in the last

verse, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart” (18:35). The significance of each character in the parable is clear:

- The king represents God the Father, as he calls people to account for their sin, extends mercy to us, but then requires us to show mercy.
- The steward or debtor is “you”—a man or woman to whom God offers mercy.
- The debt, by implication, is what each person owes to God.

When people listen to a story, they have two impulses. The first is to identify with someone in the story, perhaps the hero. Second, we evaluate the characters in the story. We approve or disapprove of what they do. It is easy to evaluate this story. The king is generous, and although he seems soft at the beginning, we see that he has standards by the end. The steward is repulsive. The king forgives his vast debt, then he throws his partner into prison for something so much smaller.

But with whom can we identify? Not the king. We are not billionaires, nor do we forgive billion dollar debts. Besides, Jesus says the king represents God. This leaves only two other characters—the slave who chokes or the slave who is choked—the choker or the chokee. Jesus wants us to identify with the choker.

First, like the choker, we owe God a vast debt. The debt represents everything we owe God—all the love, covenant loyalty, and obedience we should have rendered. The vast debt in the parable represents our vast sin before God. Second, we do owe smaller debts to each other. We do offend one another in many ways, small and great, some of them very painful. Jesus represents this with the smaller but still substantial debt.

We see why Jesus set up the parable this way. Jesus just described the process when a brother sins against us. Peter asks, what if it works? How often do I have to forgive? We have the same question: When can I stop forgiving and throttle the

sinner, the miscreant who needs to taste a little vengeance? We wonder, as Peter did, how many times do I have to forgive?

We know the feeling when a family member or a so-called friend pulls the same trick we have seen one hundred times. When our sweet-talking boss makes another promise he cannot keep. When a senseless “friend” humiliates someone again. When a self-important peer mouths off. When that bossy neighbor criticizes your house and yard once more.

Then our fingers begin to twitch and we think: Enough forgiveness! Surely it is time to choke a little. Sadly, we play the role of the steward at times; we would rather choke than forgive. So we need Jesus’ warning: “This is how my Father will treat you unless you forgive your brother” (18:35).

Readers are torn. We identify with the choker, but we are also repelled by him. Who wants to receive mercy one moment and deny it the next? We think, “That is not me! I repudiate it!” This is the wisdom and mercy of Jesus. He shows us our worst tendency, not through an accusation, but through a story that lets us rebuke and correct ourselves.

#### **WARNING TO THE MERCILESS (18:32-35)**

In the story, the problem of the unforgiving steward remains. The king rebukes him: “Wicked slave, all that debt I forgave you because you begged me to. Was it not necessary for you to have mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” (18:32-33, author’s translation). Yes, those who receive mercy must show mercy. If the king has such mercy on us, his mercy must touch our hearts.

So the parable leads us to repent. But the parable is more than a story. It is also a veiled prophecy of the future. Jesus tells the parable under the shadow of the cross. Soon enough, he will go to Jerusalem for the last time. He will be condemned to death and he will die—for our sins. (This prophecy brackets our section, in

16:21, 20:17).

In the story, the king forgives the vast debt, loses all his money, by a word. But in the real world, the debt is forgiven not by a word, but at the price of Jesus' blood, which he will soon shed.

In a sense, therefore, the king in the parable represents God the Father. But in a sense, Jesus is the king. Jesus is the final source of mercy. He also warns Peter and warns us. If you know the king's mercy, then you must show the king's mercy. If you cannot forgive others, then you do not truly grasp the king's forgiveness. The conclusion of the story, in the parable, and Jesus' final remark outside the parable both state the warning. The story says, "In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed." Then Jesus adds, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (18:34-35).

Paul says, "Note then the kindness and the severity of God" (Rom 11:22, ESV). His kindness leads him to forgive all our debt, if we ask. But his severity rebukes all sin, including the sin of hard-heartedness. If we love God's grace, then we must extend grace, or we don't understand grace at all. A failure to forgive, Jesus' parable says, raises doubts that the one who was wronged ever tasted God's grace. A refusal to forgive casts that person's forgiveness into doubt. As Jesus said "So will the Father treat you, unless you forgive" (18:35).

What Jesus asks is not easy. Sometimes we want to forgive, but we cannot seem to let go of our hurt. It can be easier to forgive the sin of a stranger or a pagan than a close friend, a relative, or a fellow Christian. We expect mistreatment from some strangers and foes. Whatever they do, we can say, "What do you expect?" We can forgive them, because they know not what they do.

But we expect more from fellow believers. In the church, we expect to find honesty, love, and compassion. Relationships with family and long-time friends can be hard too. The longer we are together, the more love and laughter we share. But more time also means more opportunity for

offense, for hurt feelings. And the wounds of a friend hurt the most.

We do hurt one another—more than we like to admit. We speak carelessly, we forget promises, we fail to offer help in an hour of need, and more. But we must learn to forgive. It is right before the Lord, who forgave us so much more. It also blesses us when we forgive. If we harbor anger or bitterness, the Lord wants us to consider. We need to forgive. We ought to forgive—for our own benefit, for the benefit of our brothers and sisters, and above all because we love and honor Jesus, who first forgave us.

The life of the hostages in Lebanon was brutally difficult. They lived in tiny, dark, suffocating cells. They suffered extreme heat and cold. They lived in filth and constantly battled vermin. They were blindfolded and chained. They were often alone; when together, they might be forbidden to speak. How did the hostages feel toward their captors? At their release, a reporter asked if they had a message for his captors. One, who explicitly identified himself as a non-christian, replied with icy hatred, "Yes, I hope you die a slow and painful death." When they put the same question to Terry Anderson, he replied, "I don't hate anyone. I'm a Christian. I am required to forgive, no matter how hard it may be." Perhaps Anderson was filled with rage at the beginning, but he had years to meditate on his condition, so that he finally saw it aright, through the work of Jesus Christ. As we meditate on the work of Christ, we can extend the same love and mercy when someone wounds us.

God has forgiven us a vast debt. As a result, we owe him our mind, our heart, our will. Our passage summons us to give ourselves to the Lord not through an act of obedience or service, but by letting his mercy sink into our mind and heart. God has forgiven you "all that debt," not by a mere word, but by the life and blood of his Son. Since the Lord had such mercy on us we must have mercy and forgive others.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This article is adapted from Daniel Doriani, *Matthew* (2 vols.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008), 2:89-90, 150-68.

<sup>2</sup>Most, but not all, manuscripts have this sentence.

<sup>3</sup>Most, but not all, early manuscripts have the words “against you.” The Greek words for “against you” are very short (*εἰς ὅτε*) and sound the same as the ending of a Greek word for “sins” that is like the word in 18:15, but longer. Since groups of copyists sometimes wrote as one person read, the similarity of sounds may best explain the omission of these words from many manuscripts.

<sup>4</sup>D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 403-04.

<sup>5</sup>The three step procedure is found in other contemporary sources. W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1964), 221ff.

<sup>6</sup>Translations tend to avoid this phrasing, sometimes for sophisticated reasons. For a defense of the literal reading, see Carson, *Matthew*, 373.

<sup>7</sup>The Greek is *pragmatos* (πράγματος). See Duncan Derrett, “Where Two or Three Are Convened in My Name...’ A Sad Misunderstanding” *Expository Times*, 91 (1979-80), 83-86.

<sup>8</sup>Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 456.

<sup>9</sup>See Richard Horsley, “Slavery in the Greco-Roman World,” *Semeia* 84 (2001): 41-55; M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York: Viking, 1980), 93-122; P. R. C. Weaver, *Familia Caesaris: A Social Study of the Emperor’s Freedmen and Slaves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1972); Bruce Winter, “St. Paul as a Critic of Roman Slavery in 1 Corinthians 7:21-23,” *Pauleia* 4 (1998), 1-20; S. S. Bartchy, “Slavery,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (ed. Geoffrey Bromiley; 4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979-88), 4:539-46.

<sup>10</sup>Josephus, “Antiquities of the Jews,” in *The Works of Josephus* (trans. William Whiston; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 319 (section 12.4.4.).

<sup>11</sup>Syntactically, the original reads this way, “Wicked

slave, all that debt I forgave you.” The forward location of “all that debt” places emphasis on that phrase.