

Matthew 18:21-35 The Precepts of Forgiveness

Alright we are beginning the last section of Matthew chapter 18, Matthew 18:21-35 as we seek to finish out this chapter today. This is the fourth of five messages that Matthew is presenting in the section chapters 5 - 25. Chapter 18 is his fourth sermon in this section, The Precepts of the Kingdom. This is a sermon on relationships.

So far we have seen in verses 1 through 14, The Precepts of Greatness, as the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Which one of us is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And Jesus took a small child and said, "When you become like this small child, you will be the greatest." The small child representing that dependence upon the Lord. He did not say, *become immature as children*, or to *be childish as children*, but be childlike in your approach to the Lord and in your following of Jesus Christ. Just like a small child would be dependent upon his parents, so He says, "If you want to be part of the kingdom you must be like a child."

Again emphasizing He was not saying that this message is only for children. I know children's ministries use these verses as an example of the Lord's ministry to children. Well, the Lord does have a ministry to children, but He is talking to adults and He is telling them to become child like. It is very difficult to be an adult, but spiritually approach the Lord in childlike faith. To become humble as a child is the key prerequisite for walking with the Lord.

Then last week in verses 15 through 20, The Precepts Concerning Sin. The Precepts Concerning Greatness verses 1 to 14; The Precepts Concerning Sin in verses 15 through 20. Jesus says, "Now that you've learned that you must approach the things of the Lord like a little child, here is how you are to handle the sin problem. If someone sins against you..." There are three conditional clauses that are progressive here:

- (1) If someone sins against you, you go to them alone and you present their sin to them that they have sinned against you. And if they hear you, you have gained your brother.
- (2) If he refuses to hear you, then go and take with you two or three others so that those two or three others can hear the complaint and determine and judge whether there has even been a sin committed. That is not to side with the person who is making the complaint, it is to establish the facts.
- (3) And if they establish the facts that sin has been committed and the guilty party still will not repent, then it says then tell it to the church. Let the church decide what must be done. If he does not hear the church than he is to be, basically in religious terms, excommunicated. He is to be removed from the fellowship because he is then like a heathen and a tax collector.

Because he says in the very next verse, the fourth verse of the section, in verse 18, **The things that you bind on earth will have already been bound in heaven; the things that you loose on earth will already have been loosed in heaven.** So the things that you decide about

binding people to their sins or loosing people from their sins has been a decree from heaven, not a decree from man. It is not a people centered thing.

And he says this is important. In verse 19 he says *within the body of Christ there must be agreement*. The word *agreement* is **συμφωνεῖ** (sumphōnei), where we get our English word *symphony* from. So in essence in the body of Christ there must be harmony. The body of Christ is playing the same song but with different instruments. We are all different, but we are all supposed to be on the same page. And if we have sin - where one person sins against another and refuses to repent - that person must be removed because there must be agreement, there must be harmony within the body of Christ.

And then verse 20, Jesus said the reason why this can be and why this should be is because where two or three are gathered Jesus is in the midst. So His Spirit, we are in unity with His Spirit who is there. All of this applies to people. Two or three are gathered, or more, that is where the church is, where two or three are gathered. We have had the comfort of that many times over the years, having two or three and gathering together. Jesus is in our midst in His fullness. And because He is in our midst and in order for Him to be effective, we must be in unison with one another.

So today we have in verses 21 to 35 the third set of precepts, The Precepts of Forgiveness. We have had greatness; we have had concerning sin; now The Precepts of Forgiveness. And how important that is, in order to deal with the sin problem you must be humble as a child. That is, come and work things out like a little child. Let God's Spirit bring unity within the body of Christ. But now we are talking about *forgiveness*, because when a person does come and repent of their sins there must be forgiveness. What exactly is the perspective on forgiveness? And this is a fascinating concept in and of itself.

Because in verse 21 - verses 21 and 22, The Conduct of Forgiveness. **Then when Peter came to Him, he said, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I will forgive him? Until seven times?" Jesus says to him, "I do not say to you, until seven times, but, until seventy times seven."** Four hundred ninety times.

Now Peter thought he was giving his brother a break by saying, "If my brother sins against me, how often do I have to forgive him? Seven times?" Now in Jewish circles in the times of Jesus if you forgave somebody two or three times in a day you were doing them a favor. So all Peter did was double it. "Should I forgive him seven times?" Really performing a great act there by forgiving them seven times. Except Jesus comes back and says, "No, not seven times, I say unto you, seventy times seven." Four hundred ninety times in a day you must forgive your brother. In other words, we are commanded to forgive without counting. Forgiveness comes four hundred ninety times a day if it is necessary.

Now I want to establish something here for us that was established with Jewish history and the Jewish Scriptures and was established in the New Testament church. Is that dealing with discipline of sin was not punishment, but rather discipline to bring about repentance and forgiveness. It was never about punishment.

In Leviticus 19:17-18 God said to the Jews, "**You shall not hate your brother in your heart: and you shall in no wise rebuke your neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him. You shall not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.**" You know in context now what that means, *to love your neighbor as yourself*; it means disciplinary principles must be applied but for the purpose of restoration and forgiveness. Not for the purpose of punishment.

It is interesting that Paul dealt with the problem in Corinth. In I Corinthians 5:4-5 he dealt with a man that was having immoral relationships with his stepmother. And so he told the church that he must be confronted with his sin because a little leaven leavens the whole lump. His sin will corrupt that church if he does not repent. And so they dealt with him and he says, "I will not repent," and they did not do anything about it. So he comes back, Paul comes back and says that this person because he has not repented, he says in verse four of first Corinthians 5, "**In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such an one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.**" So he says, "Turn him loose. Remove him from the fellowship. Turn him over to Satan and to the world, and let Satan destroy his flesh so that he will repent. For that day when the Lord comes, he will be able to have a right standing before God." So again it is about restoration. It is about forgiveness. It is about applying severe disciplines on someone's life to bring them to repentance.

And I think that is something we have to also realize about what Jesus is saying here because Luke brings out some other information for us. In Luke 17:3-4, that in another place where Jesus says, "You are to forgive your brother not seven times but seventy times seven *if he should repent.*" *Repentance* is a requirement.

Now I have been in Christian circles before where they have taught forgiveness to the point that you are to forgive everybody who sins against you whether they have said they are sorry or not, whether they have repented or not. You are to forgive them for your sake so that you feel good about yourself. That is self-preservation.

The point is, here Jesus is outlining something for us of how important it is to humble ourselves, even to administer severe discipline on people who will not repent. There must be repentance. The word repentance **μετανοέω** (metanoēō) means *to make a decision for change*. So a person just cannot just say, "Well, I'm sorry, will you forgive me?" He has to repent. He has to admit it is sin. He has to want to go in a different direction for the sake of unity, for the sake of harmony. And taking this backwards as we have gone forwards with these precepts, to be humble about it. To own up to the responsibility so that restoration can be administered.

So all of this now, forgiving four hundred ninety times assumes that the guilty party has repented according to Luke 17:3-4. And that Jesus did not command us to count the times you forgive. If someone comes up and does you wrong, it does not go, "I forgive you, that is one."

"I forgive you, that is two."

You got a long way to go. It is not a command to count how many times you forgive people, but to forgive without counting. Forgive is a principle. Forgive is a means to bring unity back together.

In verses 23 to 27, The Compassion of Forgiveness. **On account of this the kingdom of Heaven was likened to a man, a king...** that is the literal translation, not just *a king* but to a man who is a king **...who desired to settle his account with his slaves.** And just studying the text from its original language, let me just say to you without getting too technical, that the king has a slave who he has put in charge of all of his accounts, and he is dealing with this first slave and apparently the king has loaned him almost one billion dollars. And that money was to be sent out through the rest of the slaves in order for the king to have all of his accounts paid and his bills paid. So he says, "I am going to settle my accounts. I am going to see where my money has been going. Let's call in this head slave."

Verse 24, **And when he began to settle, one debtor of ten thousand talents was brought to him.** The word ten thousand is the word *myriads*. It means *an uncountable number*. Some have estimated that ten thousand talents could be as little as one million dollars of our money but probably closer to one billion dollars of our money. And the word *talent* is a piece of money. Some of you might have come across this word elsewhere in the Scriptures. It is not talking about your human ability talent; it is talking about money. It is a talent. So this one who was a debtor of ten thousand talents was brought to him. We have to understand verse 27 that the word *debtor* or *debt* is actually a loan. He was loaned this money to take care of the king's business.

Verse 25, **But he not having anything to repay, the lord of him commanded him to be sold, also his wife and children, and all things, as much as he had,** and that everything was to be repaid from selling his family and possessions. That is how they took care of debts in those days, especially when criminal activity is suspected. You take the wife sell her on the auction block. Sell the children the same way. Take all the family possessions and sell them and the one who is owed the money takes the money from these sales.

But verse 26, **Therefore having fallen down, the slave was worshipping him, saying...** Now as soon as you see the word *worship*, right away you are probably thinking he is singing hymns. He decided he is going to sing some praises. The word *worship* in Scripture literally has nothing to do with singing. We call our time *worship services*, but the word *worship* literally means *to fall down, to show respect towards a dignitary in whose presence you are*. And so he bowed down and showed respect to the king after falling on the ground, which adds to our emphasis on the word *worship* in Scripture. *Worship* is not associated with singing. *Worship* is associated with an expression of submission, bowing down in submission to the dignitary to whom you are showing respect.

In John 4:24 Jesus said that God is a spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth. So he says true worship is submission to the Spirit of God and submission to the truth of God. When you obey God and submit to His Spirit that is the highest order of worship, which is why Jesus later on in the text will tell us that you are singing with

your lips but from your heart you are not worshiping me. It is in vain because He looks at the heart. He says you are giving lip service, but it is not true worship.

The slave was worshiping him, saying, "Lord, have patience over me, and I will pay all to you." And again another good word study, the word *patience*. There are two words translated *patience* in the Scriptures:

(1) One is the literal word *patience* that we use in everyday life, it is **ὑπομένω** (hupomenō) in the Greek text and it literally means *to remain under*. To be *patient* means *to remain under your circumstances*.

(2) There is another word for *patience* that is translated *long-suffering* and it means *to be slow in human reaction towards other people*.

So when it comes to do with people, being patient with people, it means to be slow in human reaction. When it comes to do with patience of circumstances, it means to remain under your circumstances. Both things Christians are commanded to do. He is teaching us to remain under our circumstances trusting Him, relying on Him.

But now this word *long-suffering* is being used, **μακροθυμία** (makrothumia). And what the slave is saying, "Be slow in your judgment towards me. Be slow in your human reaction over me and I will repay you everything." Boy, we have heard that before. How would you like to owe one billion dollars, have no way to pay, and say, "Just give me a break, I will come up with the money." That will be pretty hard to do.

Verse 27, **And having compassion, the lord of that slave released him.** Not only did he release him, **he forgave him the loan.** English text says *debt*. But it is the Greek word for *a loan*. He loaned him that money and said, "Not only will I release you and not bring all of this punishment upon you, I will forgive you the debt. You do not owe me a thing." That is a lot of compassion. That is a lot of forgiveness. Did he deserve it? No. But it is because the king had compassion.

But then there is The Contradiction of Forgiveness in verses 28-34. **But when the slave went out, he found one of his fellow slaves who was owing him one hundred denarii.** One denarii is one day's wage, one hundred denarii is one hundred day's wages. So here is this slave going out to the other slave saying, "Okay you guys owe me some money. Remember the hundred denarii I gave you? You need to pay it back."

And when he grabbed him, he was choking him, saying, "Pay me whatever you are owing." Therefore having fallen down at his feet, his fellow slave was pleading him, saying, "Have patience over me, and I will repay all to you," which is what this slave told the king, "I will repay everything to you, just give me a break." **But he was not willing, but having gone away he threw him into prison until he should pay back the debt being owed. Now when his fellow slaves saw the things that had happened...** So now the whole group of slaves are in on this because they saw how he was treated, and they know how they are going to be treated. **When they saw all the things that had happened, they were greatly grieved. And when**

they came, they reported to their lord all the things which happened. Then having called him (that is the slave) **to Him, his lord said to him, "Wicked slave!"** The word *wicked* is the word **πονηρός** (ponēros) *the evil*, that is what Satan is called, *the evil one*. He is calling him an evil slave.

"I forgave you all that debt, since you pleaded with me. Was it not necessary that you also to have mercy on your fellow slave, as also I myself had mercy to you?" And having become angry, his lord delivered him over to the tormentors until he should pay back all that debt owing to him. One billion dollars, the full debt.

The Creed of Forgiveness is given to us in verse 35. The Lord's message in all this. **So also My heavenly Father will do to you if each of you from your hearts should not forgive his brother their trespasses.** Just like what happened in this parable. Your heavenly Father will do to you if you do not forgive others who have sinned against you. Because the point is, the king being the Lord himself and we being the sinners, who owe Him.

It is interesting that all the way through the Old Testament and in the New Testament sin is looked at as a debt. God has a judicial system by which He holds all people into account. And if you sin against God, you owe Him a debt. You have to pay Him back. The problem is if you cannot pay Him back, you have no way to pay Him back you are stuck. That is why we are in the mess we are in. God sent His Son because we cannot pay Him back. We cannot pay Him back one billion dollars because of our sins. And if we are able to, we would turn right around and sin all over again. And so He sent His Son to die on the cross to pay for our sins, to be the payment for those sins, that we might be acceptable and received before God.

But God's entire sin system is a debt system that is found in a judicial system where we stand before the judge and we are judged. It is almost like being taken to small claims court except for us it is not small claims. This is a big time. You cannot take a one billion dollar debt to small claims court. This is big time court.

So the message is, God says, "You know I have forgiven you out of compassion. Not because you deserve it. I have forgiven you; I have had compassion on you, and I would expect you to turn around and be involved in this forgiveness process toward the people who sin against you, just like I forgive you for sinning against me."

It important that when we deal with the sin problem, when people sin against us or do us wrong, even if we have to take necessary disciplines, we do it with the sense, with the view of restoration, not of punishment. Not with I will do you wrong because you did me wrong, I want to see you destroyed. But rather unity must be restored.

Jesus said in Matthew 6:14-15, **For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.** So when you come to God and say, "Through Jesus Christ I ask, Lord, forgive me for my sins. I received Jesus Christ who died for me on the cross. I receive Him, His spirit into my life to save me and to forgive me, but I am not going to forgive others." Jesus said, "Do not expect your Heavenly Father to forgive you." Your Heavenly

Father expects you to go out and represent your Heavenly Father. And respect the forgiveness process and the compassion process that God the Father exhibits on all people.

It is interesting that we talk about *compassion*. That one slave who was put into prison and given over to the tormentors, he suffered more than what his initial punishment was presented to be. God is compassionate, He is full of love. He is also full of discipline and hardship if we dare to misrepresent Him and what He stands for.

So this is all a beautiful picture in this chapter, all these precepts about kingdom living. I have no power and ability to forgive people. I am one of those, "I will get even. You did me wrong so I can find some scriptures to get back at you." But Jesus said, "In order to be a member of the kingdom of God you must come humbly as a child, dependent upon Christ, and be involved in the sin problem, in solving the sin problem, even if it means difficult discipline; so that there can be harmony. So there can be a symphony. We will all be playing the same song; all be on the same page. And forgiveness is the end result of bringing about restoration. Keep that in mind. It is not about punishment; it is about restoration. And that comes only through that humbleness.

Alright, next week we start Matthew chapter 19.

Let's close with prayer.