

ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH

NEW YORK CITY

FORGIVING AND FORGIVENESS

Matthew 18:21-35

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 14, 2008

The way we develop character and master godly conduct is one step at a time, and the disciples were learning it, not very fast perhaps but surely. They had asked about being great in Christ's kingdom and had been taught that **greatness begins with humility**, like that of a child. They had been taught to avoid sin and were warned about causing another person to sin, especially a new or weak believer. But what if the other person sins against you? The answer to that question was Jesus' next important lesson.

The remarkable thing about Jesus' teaching here is that although He had been stressing humility and would teach forgiveness, He did not say that sin should just be overlooked. Offenses must be dealt with. His explanation of how they must be dealt with is the classic text for how Christians are to handle discipline problems in the Church.

The procedure for dealing with sin is both sensible and clear, as Jesus states it. It involves three steps. **(1.) *Go and talk to the person who has sinned against you***, attempting to show him his fault. He ought to listen and correct the fault. If he does, that is the end of the matter: "You have won your brother over." **(2.) *If talking about it does not achieve a correction and reconciliation, go again, this time taking one or two others with you***, "so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." This is a clear reference to the primary legal statute of the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 19:15. **(3.) *Bring the matter before the church***. If the offending brother still does not respond, he is to be treated "as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

We can readily see the obvious from the way Jesus develops these points that a number of important principles are involved. **First**, upright conduct matters, sin must be dealt with. **Second**, discipline is to be kept as private as possible, involving as few people as possible. If it can be worked out between two individuals, that is best. **Third**, the purpose of these steps is the restoration of the offender. We sometimes say that the purpose of discipline is restorative, not retributive. That is correct. **Fourth**, the final

step is a function of the Church, which means that it should be an official action. In verse 18 Jesus gives the church the authority to bind and loose, the same authority He had given to Peter earlier. It indicates that the authority He gave to Peter was not an authority given to Peter as an individual or in virtue of a special office he was to hold. Rather, He gave it to the Church as a whole in its official functions.

Peter's Question: Our Gospel lesson from Matthew continues with Peter's question and the parable of the unmerciful servant. The parable is about forgiveness, and it teaches that we must forgive without limits since that is how God has forgiven us. The bridge to the parable is Peter's question: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" The rabbis had been teaching that one should forgive an offense three times, but not beyond that. So Peter was probably thinking that he was going a long way toward mastering the spirit of Jesus when he suggested that one might actually forgive seven times.

We tend to look down on Peter for misreading Christ's mind, supposing that we would do better. But Peter was at least asking the right question. He realized that it was right to forgive and that he had an obligation to do so. He was trying. But do we even try? To put it another way, do we forgive even seven times, not to mention the seventy-seven times suggested by Jesus? Can you think of anyone who, in the last week or month or year, you have consciously forgiven for the same offense as many as seven times? You may have, but you probably have not. So at least grant Peter something. He had been in Jesus' school for only three years and had a great deal yet to learn, but he had learned this much at least. Some of us have barely matriculated in that school and are there far from graduating with even the rudiments of Christ's teaching. When Jesus told Peter, "I tell you, not seven times, but up to seventy times seven," He did not mean that we do not need to forgive the seventy-eighth time, or course. It was a way of saying that we should never stop forgiving. Then Jesus told this story.

Forgiven but unforgiving: A certain king wanted to settle accounts with his servants, so he called in one who had an enormous debt: ten thousand talents. It is difficult to estimate how much money that was, and it may only mean the largest conceivable debt, "ten thousand" being one of the largest common numbers and a "talent" being the largest denomination of currency. However, if we do estimate it, we get some interesting results. We are dealing with ten thousand talents, that would be 750,000 times, or 9 million

ounces of gold. Assuming that gold is selling at around \$350 an ounce, we come to a figure of \$3,150,000,000. That is beyond our comprehension, which is precisely Christ's point. It was an astronomical debt.

Since the servant was unable to pay, the king was going to have him, his wife, and his children sold into slavery and his goods sold on the market to reclaim as much of the debt as possible. Hearing this, the man fell on his knees and begged, "Be patient with me, and I will pay back everything." He could not, of course, but the king had pity on him and canceled the obligation.

This man then found a fellow servant that owed him money: one hundred denarii. A denarii was day's wage for a common laborer, that was approximately a third of a year's wages. The debt was only about four or five thousand dollars. When the man with the smaller debt begged for time to repay his obligation, which he could presumably have done, the first servant hardened his heart and had the other man thrown into prison. When the people heard of this they told the king. He called the first man in, demanding, "you wicked servant, 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." Then, according to Jesus, the king turned him over to the jailers until he should pay back all he owed. The point is obvious: Christians must be limitless in forgiving others since God has been infinitely forgiving with them.

Here is a Troubling Statement: We might wish that Jesus had stopped there, but He had this additional disturbing word: "This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." The statement is troubling because it seems to imply a "work" salvation, that is if you forgive others (a work), you will be forgiven. But even if it does not teach that, it seems to imply that grace continues by means of works. We may be saved by grace, but if we fail to act rightly, God may cancel his forgiveness and have us thrown into hell anyway. Such an interpretation is unacceptable for several reasons. Therefore, some have tried to work out ways of getting around it.

Forgiven and Forgiving: What we need to recognize is that Jesus is not giving the whole of the gospel message in one story. What he says is true enough, that there is an unbreakable connection between God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of other people. Such a word is intended to snap

us out of our lethargy and confront us with the life-changing power of the gospel. But it does not mean we are saved by forgiving others. Jesus is only saying that, whatever else is involved (and a great deal more is involved), forgiveness must be part of what it means to be a Christian.

Here is the explanation. Although we are justified by faith apart from works, being justified is not the only thing that happens to us in salvation. In fact, it is not even the first thing. Justification is by faith, so faith at least comes before it. And since, as Jesus said to Nicodemus, we cannot “see” or “enter” the kingdom of God unless we are born again, regeneration or the new birth must come before entering or believing (John 3:3-5). No one believes on Christ and is justified who has not already been given a new nature. This new nature is the nature of Jesus himself or, as we could also say, it is God’s own forgiving nature. Although the new nature does not manifest itself entirely at once, if we are justified, that nature will increasingly and inevitably express itself in an instantaneous second work of grace. This sanctifying experience will remove the old and conflicting nature and it is replaced with a nature that loves, “God with your entire mind, heart, and strength, and your neighbor as your self.” This will inevitably express itself in our forgiveness of others, just as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven us. We will be able to pray, as Jesus instructed us to pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Matthew 6:12).

By standing before the holy God and seeing ourselves as the sinners we are, vile and yet forgiven through the death of God’s Son. We must know that we have been saved and sanctified solely because of the undeserved mercy of God. That awareness should humble us so that we simply have no other option but to forgive others and to do it from the heart.

How many times should I forgive someone who sins against me? Do it until you lose count. And then give it over to God, whose forgiveness knows no end.

PRAYER: Forgive us, O God, for the wrongs we have done, for the judgment we have rendered about others. And for the petty remarks which have sprung to our lips, for the tales we have told which did not build someone up. For the selfish prayers we have spoken to thee. Have mercy upon us, and enable us to follow a better way. In Christ’ name we pray. Amen.