

### Matthew 18:19 – 35

<sup>18:15</sup> If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. <sup>16</sup> But 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. <sup>17</sup> If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup> Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.

<sup>19</sup> Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by my Father who is in heaven. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three have gathered together in my name, I am there in their midst. <sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. <sup>23</sup> For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. <sup>25</sup> But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' <sup>27</sup> And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' <sup>29</sup> So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' <sup>30</sup> But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. <sup>31</sup> So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. <sup>32</sup> Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup> And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. <sup>35</sup> My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.'

Literary Context in Matthew's Gospel:

| 14:13 – 33                                            | 14:34 – 15:20                                                                                | 15:21 – 28                                      | 15:29 – 39                                                                       | 16:1 – 12                                                                           | 16:13 – 17:13                             | 18:1 – 18                                              |
|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Jesus feeds the 5,000                                 | Jesus disputes with Pharisees                                                                | The Canaanite woman asks for miraculous healing | Jesus feeds the 4,000                                                            | The Pharisees come to ask Jesus for a sign                                          | Jesus asks, "Who do you say I am?"        | Caring for new believers                               |
| From the towns (Mt.14:13)                             | Gennesaret (Mt.14:34), likely the Gentile side                                               | Tyre and Sidon (Mt.15:21), Gentile lands        | Along the Sea of Galilee (Mt.15:29, called 'Galilee of the Gentiles' in Mt.4:15) | The region of Magadan (Mt.15:39), along the Galilee                                 | Caesaria Philippi                         | Capernaum                                              |
| Jews<br>5 loaves of bread<br>12 baskets full leftover | Defiling comes from the heart, and is therefore universal – both Jew and Gentile are defiled | The children's bread is thrown to 'the dogs.'   | Gentiles<br>7 loaves of bread<br>7 baskets full leftover                         | Jesus reminds his disciples to beware the teaching of the Pharisees (outward focus) | Take up our cross, see Jesus transfigured | Who is the greatest?<br>Do not place stumbling blocks. |

Cultural Background

- Seven is the biblical number of completion: e.g. God completed creation in seven days (Gen.1:1 – 2:3)
- Ten thousand talents: If he's referring to talents of gold, ten thousand is about \$3 billion.<sup>1</sup>
- One hundred denarii: probably ranging from about \$1000 to \$2100.<sup>2</sup>
- 'Let him be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector' (v.17) and 'torturers' (v.34): Paul dealt with a man in unrepentant sin in 1 Corinthians 5. His motivation for excommunication and Satan's role as the accuser is important to understand:
  - <sup>4</sup>In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, <sup>5</sup>I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. (1 Cor.5:4 – 6)
  - Notice that Paul is not only concerned with the purity of the Christian community, but also the repentance of the person. He seems to believe that Satan (or 'the accuser') would propel the man by accusations and guilt back to the gathered Christian community. Those in the body of Christ Jesus share in the innocence, forgiveness, and purification he perfected in himself (1 Cor.1:30).

<sup>1</sup> "A talent is the largest monetary unit (20.4 kg of silver), equal to 6,000 drachmas, the wages of a manual laborer for fifteen years. "Ten thousand" (muriav', murias, "myriad") is the largest possible number. Thus the combination is the largest figure that can be given. The annual tax income for all of Herod the Great's territories was 900 talents per year. Ten thousand talents would exceed the taxes for all of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria. The amount is fantastic, beyond all calculation." (M. Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew* in Leander E. Kech, Senior Ed, *The New Interpreter's Bible* (NIB) Vol., VIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 382.)

<sup>2</sup> The denarius was first introduced in the late Roman Republic (about 211 BC) and was initially worth 10 donkeys. It weighed 3.9 grams. The size of the coin seems to have stayed basically the same, but Nero lowered the silver content of the coin. It was the main coin of the Roman Empire until the antonianus coin was introduced in the 3rd century AD. Its purchasing power in terms of bread in the first century has been estimated at US \$21, from 2005, though it is very difficult to estimate because of the debasement of the silver and the difficulty in calculating purchasing power parity. Nevertheless, 100 x \$21 = \$2100.

## Questions

1. Where does Peter's question come from? It is connected to what went before? Is it a non-sequitur?
  - a. When Jesus talks about two believers agreeing, Peter thinks of the situation when two people do not agree, because one person has sinned against another.
  - b. Jesus had just talked about 'When a brother sins' in general (18:15). Peter now thinks of the situation when a brother 'sins against me' (18:21).
  - c. In this entire section of 14:1 – 19:1, Jesus is training his disciples to do cross cultural ministry, for the sake of multi-ethnicity. Jewish Christians are going out to love and call Romans to Jesus. The Romans occupy their homeland, impose military rule, and crush all resistance. So Peter knows it's not going to be internally easy for them to welcome Romans and other Gentiles into the family of Jesus.
  - d. Application: With whom do you count the number of offenses done against you? (could be rhetorical: 'Keep in mind the person with whom you count the number of times they bug you or hurt you') Or, what kind of sins do people do against you that you find harder to ignore or forgive?
2. What are some questions we have about it? Most likely:
  - a. How did the guy get so much in debt?
  - b. Can God just forgive debts like that? What about the idea of Jesus paying our debt to God?
  - c. Did this guy really accept the forgiveness of the lord, or was he still trying to pay it back?
  - d. Does God take forgiveness away?
  - e. Should our motivation be the fear of having our debt reinstated?
  - f. Who are the torturers? What does it mean that the lord does that?
  - g. Is forgiveness a one time thing or ongoing thing? Between people and between us and God...
  - h. Where does the analogy break down?
    - i. Recall that parables are meant to highlight only 1 or 2 main ideas. For example, the parable of the lost sheep (Mt.18:12 – 13 or Lk.15:1 – 7) is great at illustrating the heart of God as a shepherd looking for us as the lost sheep. But it does not describe human free will, which is a reality.
3. What would have been surprising about the parable *to Simon Peter*?
  - a. The size of the debt
  - b. The forgiveness of the king
  - c. Slave #1 seizing and choking slave #2
4. How is this parable a response to Peter's question?
  - a. Let's explore the question, 'How did the guy get so far in debt?'
    - i. This is an outrageous sum of money. He must have worked for the master and screwed up something big time. No one can borrow and spend that much normally. Possible lessons:
      1. Israel served God for centuries and racked up a big debt, so to speak
      2. The longer we claim to represent God, the more mistakes we make and screw things up!!
      3. It's a purely fictitious device: an outrageously impossible debt represents how outrageous it would be to try to quantify our sin in God's eyes.
      4. I believe all of the above – especially the third point. I don't think God experiences our sin as simply a 'debt.' But Jesus uses this motif in this outrageous way to respond Simon Peter's question.
    - ii. To put ourselves in his shoes, imagine that you bungled a major financial transaction for a large family-based company, tried to get it back but lost even more money, stupidly embezzled money and tried to gamble with it but lost even more money. You were responsible for several million dollars, and you don't have that kind of money lying around at all. Then you had to face the one person who is both CEO and owner of the company. You would be liable to being fired, brought to trial on criminal charges, publicly disgraced, and not able to work professionally in your field ever again. But he beg for mercy and he forgives you. That's amazing. That's how it would have felt.
  - b. Let's explore the question, 'Did this guy really accept the forgiveness of the lord?'
    - i. The last thing he said was, 'I will repay you everything' in v.26. The lord forgave him the enormous debt. But he seems to have been driven by some kind of anxiety when he

- put his fellow slave in a choke hold. He *tortures* and threatens the other guy. He becomes a torturer.
- ii. Does he think he still has to pay his lord back? That's distinctly possible. It's not normal behavior to choke your fellow slave. Especially because he had just been forgiven for a catastrophic mistake and a gigantic amount of money and it didn't seem to get to his heart.
  - iii. How else could he have responded to his fellow slave?
    1. Agreed to be paid back later. That's reasonable.
    2. Forgiven the entire debt also. That's also reasonable.
    3. Anything in between. The principle here is that forgiveness occurs first, and then restitution of some sort is done secondly. If we get the order switched, and withhold forgiveness and relationship until restitution is made, then we are not living in the realm of God's forgiveness.
    4. But to seize and choke is to *torture*.
  - iv. Application: Why is it so easy to forget how much God forgave us? Or think that our sin was really only about a \$500 debt instead of \$50,000? Pause to reflect on that.
- c. What is the basis for the king expecting his slave/servant to be merciful like him?
- i. This parable is unusual in the sense that kings usually didn't expect that.
5. What are the limits of this parable? This is really important!!
- a. Sin is not merely a 'debt' in the strict sense. Jesus is saying to Peter that if you think of limiting forgiveness, you would have to ask why God doesn't limit. Because if sin were, strictly speaking, a *debt*, why forgive the debt out of hand (without a symbolic 'debt payer' standing in for Jesus), and then revoke the forgiveness of debt by reinstating it? The reality is that sin is not simply a debt, however big. It is a fundamental separation of being that cannot be quantified or made up for in any moral way. Although the huge sum of ten thousand talents shows that anyway. Sin is not really just a debt because Jesus wants to transform our nature and being and fill us with Himself. It's on the level of being, not just on the level of moral behavior. There is no 'paying off the debt' in reality – that's the language of the analogy but where it breaks down. And God is not 'satisfied' by inflicting an amount of pain on someone, proportional to the pain we caused him.
  - b. Does God really withhold forgiveness and hand people over to torturers? We have to be careful with this question.
    - i. 'Torturers' in v.34 should be paralleled to losing the protection of the church community and the realm of God's forgiveness in v.17. There are emotional and demonic forces outside of the protection of Jesus and his community. The 'torturers' are probably your own emotional demons and perhaps real demons that then accuse you of what you know are your shortcomings and hypocrisy. That's why it's important to read Paul in 1 Corinthians 5. Being handed over to the torturers is therefore not a picture of hell. It's a picture of an ongoing process in the life of the person during the time of the church but at a remove from it.
    - ii. God could 'hand over a person' to his/her own warped posture, in the hopes that the lack of spiritual protection would eventually wake that person up and bring them to God humbly.
  - c. To what extent is God like this king?
    - i. He seems more like a Gentile king. Notice that under Jewish Law, there would be time tables for debt forgiveness and release of slaves – every seventh year of their indenture, or every Jubilee year (49<sup>th</sup> or 50<sup>th</sup> year on Israel's fixed calendar).
    - ii. God comes personally to deal with the corruption in our human nature, the source of our sins; he doesn't just deal with the downstream *consequences* of our sinful actions.
    - iii. But he does care very much about forgiveness (Mt.6:12, 14 – 15)
6. Application: Being merciful like our king
- a. Who is someone that you need Jesus to help you forgive?
  - b. What is one practice you do or can do that reminds you to walk in forgiveness?
  - c. Do we have trouble accepting God's forgiveness of us?

(optional) Pick one of the stories below and discuss why it would be difficult and yet important to forgive.

### **Illus of forgiveness, reconciliation**

Son of Sam Doesn't Want Out of Jail Because of Jesus

"I have no interest in parole and no plans to seek release," David Berkowitz, the convicted "Son of Sam" serial killer, tells Fox News in a new letter. Berkowitz claims he is "already a 'free man'" because he has found Jesus Christ. "I am not saying this jokingly," he assures. "I really am." But he's really not: Berkowitz, 58, is serving six consecutive sentences of 25 years to life for murdering six people and injuring seven others. He has been denied parole five times previously in 34 years of incarceration. "I'm a hyperactive, always 'on the go' type person," writes Berkowitz. "But I've often been told that I do not take enough time for myself." Presumably it is easier behind bars.

#### *Online Comments*

- Yes, Jesus can forgive him, even after he brutally raped and murdered that 11 year girl. Screw the girl, and her right to justice, the lord needs another follower, Born Again. He even forgives all the priests who have raped 100,000 of thousands of children.
- This is very good. Jesus has forgiven this poor Man, this is so all can Love and worship the God Lord Jesus. Jesus forgives, even after Son of Sam raped and then beat to death the 11 year old girl. Praise God Jesus. See how he has forgiven. Screw the girl and her right to justice, come to and praise Jesus and gain 3rd party forgiveness, Just be born again all is forgiven. Praise God. Forgive the poor criminals.

### **Illus of power, forgiveness, obedience**

It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there--the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blanching face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. 'How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein.' he said. 'To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!'

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.

- Corrie Ten Boom with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Hiding Place*

### **Illus of forgiveness, racial reconciliation, social justice**

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The rules were simple: If a white policeman or army officer voluntarily faced his accusers, confessed his crime, and fully acknowledged his guilt, he could not be tried and punished for that crime. Hard-liners grumbled about the obvious injustice of letting criminals go free, but Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu insisted that the country needed healing even more than it needed that particular brand of justice. At one hearing, a policeman named van de Broek recounted an incident when he and other officers shot an 18-year old boy and burned the body, turning it on a fire like a piece of barbeque meat, to destroy the evidence. Eight years later van de Broek returned to the same house and seized the boy's father. The wife was forced to watch as policemen bound her husband on a woodpile, poured gasoline over his body, and ignited it. The courtroom grew hushed as the elderly woman who had lost first her son and then her husband was given a chance to respond. 'What do you want from Mr. van de Broek?' the judge asked. She said she wanted van de Broek to go to the place where they burned her husband's body and gather up the dust so she could give him a decent burial. With his head down, the policeman nodded agreement. Then she, a follower of Jesus, added a further

request: 'Mr. van de Broek took all my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to the ghetto and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr. van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so he can know my forgiveness is real.' Spontaneously, some in the courtroom began singing Amazing Grace as the elderly woman made her way to the witness stand, but van de Broek did not hear the hymn. He had fainted, overwhelmed. (from Philip Yancey, *Rumors of Another World*, 2003, Zondervan)