

Focus on Matthew 18:21–35

WHAT is important to know?

— From “*Exegetical Perspective*,” Lewis R. Donelson

The passage, to the surprise and chagrin of many Christians, concludes, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (v. 35). Despite Christian nervousness about the implied limitation on God’s mercy, readers of Matthew have long noted that the provisional nature of God’s forgiveness that is articulated here is also articulated throughout the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew at least, God’s forgiveness to some extent depends upon our forgiveness. Christians, who live under God’s grace and forgiveness, will be judged by this same God, mostly by whether they show the same grace and forgiveness to others.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “*Theological Perspective*,” Kathryn D. Blanchard

Peter makes explicit the perennial question that plagues all Christians in all times and places: When may we stop forgiving those who offend us repeatedly? Christians since the early church have consistently taken the meaning of Jesus’ answer—whether translated “seventy-seven” or “seventy times seven”—to be crystal clear: never. God is a God who forgives completely, and the body of Christ is called to do likewise. However, even God’s forgiveness has its limits. The theological tenet that God’s “default” stance toward the penitent is one of mercy must lead to the conviction that God’s people are those who likewise practice mercy—willingly, concretely, and as a communal way of life.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “*Pastoral Perspective*,”

Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn

Marjorie Thompson writes: “To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment may seem. . . . Forgiveness involves excusing persons from the *punitive consequences* they deserve because of their behavior. The behavior remains condemned, but the offender is released from its effects as far as the forgiver is concerned. Forgiveness means the power of the original wound’s power to hold us trapped is broken.”

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “*Homiletical Perspective*,”

Charles L. Campbell

The issue here is not how many times an isolated individual should forgive some other random person who sins against him or her. Rather, the context is the community of faith. The concern here is the life of the church and the practices necessary to build up the community of faith. At the heart of those practices is forgiveness, not as an isolated act, but as an ongoing activity among members of the community. Within this context, there can be no limit on forgiveness, because it is a never-ending practice that is essential to the life of the church.

Parables

Seven of the remaining 12 sessions in this quarter (including today's) are from Matthew. Of those seven, five consist of parables (and a sixth teaching is clearly parable-like).

Although the church almost exclusively identifies parables with Jesus, the Old Testament has several examples of such teachings. The prophet Isaiah tells a parable about a vineyard that yielded wild grapes to convey the basis for God's impending judgment against Israel in the practices of injustice and violence (Isaiah 5:1–7). Similarly, the prophet Nathan tells King David the parable of the ewe lamb to make the king confront his culpability in the murder of Uriah (2 Samuel 12:1–10).

Some of Jesus' parables are told in situations of conflict (Luke 15:1–3). More generally, they provided listeners in his day with an object or experience or relationship in everyday life that Jesus uses to invoke or convey some spiritual truth.

Many parables, particularly those in Matthew, identify their intent as revealing some aspect of God's sovereign realm ("kingdom of heaven"). Some people may take that to mean that parables reveal what life will be like in the afterlife. Certainly God's reign points toward the future. Clearly, the qualities of that realm have not been fully realized on earth. We wait and hope with longing for such fulfillment. But the reign and realm of God exist now, in our midst. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:21). Parables describe characteristics and qualities of God's reign that intend to transform how we live on this side of the grave.

One further note: Jesus often infuses parables with extreme hyperbole. In this week's parable, the debt of the first servant is said to be "ten thousand talents." "Ten thousand" was the highest numerical notation in that day. Likewise, a talent was the largest sum of money. Such a debt would have taken an ordinary day laborer more than 136,000 years to repay. The exaggerations in Jesus' parables are not to be understood literally, but spiritually. It is an impossible debt to incur, yet even it is forgiven. Jesus does not mean that forgiveness reaches its limit on the 78th offense (or 491st, as some manuscripts render that formula). He means that God's forgiveness has no limits.

