

Matthew 18: 21-35

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Lesson: Forgiveness

The quarterly (Explore The Bible) skips over Matthew: 18:15-18 but covering forgiveness without discussing how it applies to Christian and secular justice seems unbalanced.

Matthew 18:15-18

15 Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

16 But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

18 Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

When I first started studying for this lesson, I went straight to verse 18 and read it without the preceding context.

Here's the NASB version...

Matthew 18:18 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.

I interpreted it to be an **encouragement** for us to put in the effort to build or recover a broken relationship here on Earth because it would be a lasting treasure for us in Heaven. I think that's a beautiful idea that would really encourage us to work hard on our relationships.

<Pause to give people time to consider this.>

Unfortunately, that's not the correct interpretation.

In first-century Jewish usage, "bind" and "loose" were rabbinic terms meaning:

Bind = forbid, **declare something prohibited**, or impose a restriction (like excluding someone from fellowship).

Loose = permit, **declare something allowed**, or release/forgive (like restoring someone to fellowship).

What the verse is actually saying is that when we follow God's guidelines for working through these very tough situations where a brother or sister commits an offense, that the outcome was actually made in Heaven.

So, the verse is saying that when the church (or a group of believers acting together) follows this process humbly and in alignment with God's will, their decisions about inclusion or exclusion in the community will be ratified or confirmed by heaven.

God **stands behind** the faithful exercise of church authority and discipline. The NASB's phrasing ("shall have been bound/loosed") especially emphasizes that the earthly decision reflects what has already been decided in heaven—**it's not humans overriding God but partnering with His will.**

So, the way we handle these challenging disputes is important because God has directed us in the way He wants them handled and these people are our brothers and sisters and none of us would ever want someone to be treated badly because of our anger or our poor following of God's orders.

When a brother or sister sins against us, there is a corrective process that occurs for their benefit, giving them an opportunity to correct course, and a process for us – to clear the burden on our heart.

So, let's have a look at that.

Matthew 18:21-22 (KJV)

21 "Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?

22 Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven."

Peter likely believed that seven times was more than generous because the Rabbis taught that a person should be forgiven three times.

Q: Where did the Rabbis come up with three?

<Pause to let people answer, they may have a different interpretation.>

A: The Rabbis based the three times on Genesis 50:17.

"So shall ye say unto Joseph, Forgive, I pray thee now, the trespass of thy brethren, and their sin; for they did unto thee evil: and now, we pray thee, forgive the trespass of the servants of the God of thy father. And Joseph wept when they spake unto him."

Genesis 50:17 (KJV)

In the Hebrew version, Joseph's brothers say "please" three times. I kind of imagine the self-satisfaction of the first Rabbi to work this out in a way that he could claim came from the Bible.

In the original **Hebrew**, the verse contains the particle **נָא** (*na*) **three times**:

- First: **נָא נָא** (*sa na*) — "Lift up / forgive, I pray you / please"
- Second: Embedded in the plea for the brothers' transgression
- Third: **נָא וְעַתָּה** (*ve-atah na*) — "And now, please forgive..."

In our translation, we see two:

- "I pray thee now"
- "we pray thee"

So, Peter **doubled** his current day customs by suggesting forgiveness seven times and he likely expected Jesus would commend him for such a generous and charitable position.

But as usual Jesus surprised everyone. "Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven."

Did Jesus mean 490 times? Because if he did, then most of the people in our families have overdrawn their forgiveness accounts.

He didn't. He meant for us to forgive forever.

What about crimes?

Scripture distinguishes between two aspects of forgiveness:

Heart forgiveness (internal release): This is unconditional. You release bitterness, resentment, and the desire for personal revenge, entrusting ultimate justice to God.

Romans 12:19 "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."

This mirrors how God has forgiven us through Christ—**an enormous debt we could never repay** (like the parable that follows). Harboring unforgiveness poisons your own soul and contradicts the gospel.

Have you ever done this?

A situation where you have the means to extract vengeance, to publicly come back at someone and hammer them back the same way they attacked you, or talk to coworkers or friends about what they did knowing that your words will make their way back to either the person or the boss and punish or hurt them – but then you decided instead to just let God hand out His justice and His vengeance on them?

Q: How does it work out when you stand back and let God get vengeance verses when you try to get it yourself?

<Pause and only provide my answer if the class does not toss out an example that leads the discussion.>

A: Most of the time, I will strike back, or "counter-punch". When I lay back and let God defend me though, it has always worked out much better. He does a better job on their side, and gives me a better outcome as well, where I am satisfied with His handling without getting down and ruining my possibility to ever show that person a Christ-like image.

Relational forgiveness and restoration: This is often conditional on genuine repentance (Luke 17:3-4: "If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them"). Full reconciliation may not be possible or wise immediately, especially with serious harm. Trust must be rebuilt over time, and some consequences remain.

The Bible separates personal offenses from crimes against society or the vulnerable. Romans 13 teaches that God ordains governing authorities (police, courts) as His servants to "bear the sword" and punish wrongdoers for the common good. Reporting a crime is not "unforgiving"—it can be an act of love and obedience:

- It protects others from further harm.
- It holds the offender accountable in a way the church alone cannot (churches aren't equipped to investigate or adjudicate crimes like assault, theft, fraud, or abuse).
- It aligns with justice, which God values deeply (the cross shows God satisfying justice while offering mercy).

Matthew 18:15-17 outlines a process for addressing sin within the church (private confrontation → witnesses → church involvement → treating the unrepentant as an outsider). This is primarily for relational sins and church discipline, aimed at restoration. It does **not** override civil law for actual crimes. Many Christian teachers emphasize: follow Matthew 18 for the interpersonal/spiritual side, but report crimes to authorities as Romans 13 requires.

Forgiveness doesn't make you a doormat; it makes you free from the bondage of hate while upholding what's right.

Matthew 18:23-27 (KJV)

23 Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants.

24 And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents.

25 But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made.

26 The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.

27 Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

Some comments suggest that since the King's servant's debt was so ridiculously great (equivalent to millions or even billions in today's money), that he must have been a government official. Ten thousand talents would take 200,000 years of work without a day off to earn. We don't know and it really doesn't matter, except that I think we can all close our eyes and imagine the same punishment for our own government officials, who fit this parable so well. It would be satisfying to see them end up the way this unforgiving person does.

The debt is so great that the King is effectively putting the man and his family in prison forever because they could never pay it back. Imagine the immense guilt you would feel seeing your family in prison for something you did.

It doesn't matter how great the debt you owe is if it is more than you can pay, and that obviously is what Jesus is describing in this parable. The unforgiving man's debt can never be paid. He cannot earn 200,000 years of wages. He will die with debt left over and everyone he loves will suffer because of him.

<Pause for people to make the transition.>

But Jesus tells us that the King forgave the man's debt. Jesus' father forgives our debt.

When the apostles heard this parable, they were listening with their minds, to understand the logic in the way that the Rabbis and everyday people tried to take what they hear and see around them and frame it into life application. Like the way the Rabbi

worked out that because Joseph's brothers said "please" three times that this would become the guideline.

When **we** hear it, we know it is a parable not for the mind to understand, but for the heart to appreciate.

Matthew 18:28-35 (KJV)

28 But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest.

29 And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.

30 And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt.

31 So when his fellowservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done.

32 Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me:

33 Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?

34 And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.

35 So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

God sees our heart. He sees the **traces** of the unforgiving servant no matter how well we hide it from others. He sees it in the judgement that we have for other's shortcomings. He sees it in the gossip we spread about the people we don't like. He sees it in words that don't sound judgmental to us, that we know **are** deep down judging someone.

Unlike the unforgiving servant, the people who owed **him** money **could** hope to repay it. The unforgiving servant's debt was too great to ever repay, but the grudge he held against everyone else was, by comparison, nothing at all.

<Pause.>

And we know that Jesus' parable is about us.

<Pause.>

That's a pretty depressing and discouraging tone to end on.

I can help you feel a little better about it. At work, I manage people. Every person has different abilities. Some are very smart and others are less gifted. When someone that is less gifted messes up, I try to encourage them without being too direct about how **much** better they could have done. I'm much more direct with people who have greater ability, because I know they **can** do much better.

So, when our heart feels stabbed by this parable. Maybe it pokes you harder because God knows you can do much better.